Lose Yourself

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Lose Yourself

by Daiver

Summary

"So, what's your name?"

"Remus Lupin," he said disinterestedly.

"And what's your mission?"

"Keep a low profile. Gather information. Wait for the right moment,"

Remus looked at Voldemort, smiling.

"Destroy the Order."
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AU in which Remus gets brainwashed into joining the Death Eaters. Stripped of his memories, his empathy and his love, he becomes a spy in the Order, bringing Voldemort closer to victory than ever.

But then there is Sirius Black. And the haunting, inevitable notion that nothing in this world disappears without so much as leaving a trace. Especially not love.

The question is: Will it be enough?

Notes

Welcome! This is my first Marauders fic. And let me tell you, I'm going all in with it. This story has been on my mind for a while now!
So, most importantly: This story will NOT be canon compliant! Though it takes place in the canon universe and there will be some canon events taking place, Remus becoming a Death Eater will change a LOT.

The title is not drawn from that Eminem song, but from a German song called "Verlier dich" (= Lose yourself) by the band Provinz which might be a minor (major) influence to the general tone of

the story.
Also: I definitely do NOT support JK Rowlings disgusting transphobic views.

There's so much more I want to say, but I'll shut up for now. Enjoy.

CWs will be at the beginning of every chapter.

For this one: (Heavy) Drinking, Vomiting

Chapter 1: Let The Sunshine In

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Somewhere inside something

There is a rush of greatness

Who knows what stands

In front of our lives

I fashion my future

On films in space

Silence tells me secretly

Everything

Everything

Remus closed the door to the dormitory behind him and leaned against it for a moment, closing his eyes. Silence at last.

He fished a crumpled cigarette pack out of his pocket containing a sad, last cigarette. He had kept it for weeks, had survived all NEWTs without his beloved nicotine, so that he could indulge in it now, on this last evening.

"What are you doing here already? Shouldn't you be getting wasted in the common room?" Irritated, Remus opened his eyes. Sirius was smiling back at him, casually leaning against the open window, a cigarette clamped between his index and middle fingers.

Sirius's cigarette consumption was Remus's fault, he had given him a taste for it back in fifth year when they both wanted to be like Jim Morrison. Right now, he regretted it more than ever, as Sirius occupied his much-desired smoking spot.

"Needed a break. Peter threw up next to the fireplace."

Sirius just laughed and took a drag on his cigarette. In the darkness, the embers at the tip were clearly visible. Sighing inwardly, he stood next to him and lit his precious last cigarette.

For a few puffs, there was an amicable silence. Remus looked out the window and saw a starry sky. He felt the nicotine soothe a deep-seated restlessness inside him and felt composed for the first time in days.

"Crazy, right?"

Sirius flicked ash out the window and gave Remus a meaningful look. Remus knew what he meant. All of this, that this was their last night at Hogwarts, that they would be adults starting tomorrow. That they would be joining the Order after the summer. That they would fight Voldemort-.

He shook off his thoughts. "Beyond crazy."

Sirius took a deep breath and looked out the window. He, too, was looking at the stars.

"He spoke to me today."

Remus blew the smoke out the window. "Who?" He already suspected, but it was a subject he tended not to bring up himself. He knew how close it was to Sirius.

"My brother."

"Oh," Remus tried to sound surprised. "Why is that?"

"Wished me well. Not seriously, of course. He was talking something about self-chosen destiny and shit. Barely listened to him."

"So everything's the same?"

"Not exactly." Sirius took one last drag and tossed the cigarette butt out the window. "He said to me that today will be his last day at Hogwarts, too."

Remus gave Sirius a look of understanding. "So he's joining the-"

"Death Eaters, yes." Sirius's voice sounded dull, his bright eyes darting back and forth between Remus and the night sky.

"I'm sorry about that."

He shook his head. "Don't be. Been clear to me for a long time that it's just a matter of time. It's my mother's fault. She's the one whispering it into his head, the one who made him the asshole he is now. And I wasn't... there."

Remus patted his arm. "We talked about this, Pads. Regulus is almost an adult. He can make his own decisions."

Sirius shrugged. "I hope so."

There was something heavy about the silence that followed, so Remus didn't let it get too long. "I think James and Lily have finally gotten it together, by the way."

Sirius's eyes snapped open, finally letting some of his typical mischievous manner shine through. "No way!"

"Seems like it. But I'll tell you, it was so awkward to watch."

"There are still miracles! No one ever thought that would happen anymore."

Remus flicked his cigarette butt out the window and sighed in agreement. "Especially after he's been such a terrible handful these past few months."

"Please don't start that ... When James wants to, he can be so incredibly stubborn and closed off. It drives me up the wall."

Remus thought of the many evenings when James had come to bed late at night. Of the many days he had been off track. The fact that he had never talked about it with his best friends had bothered Remus less than Sirius. He had picked a fight more than once. And Remus and Peter had stood between the fronts.

"Well, he seems to be back to normal now. That love confession earlier was really, really Jamesian. You should've seen it."

Sirius nodded with a wistful look. "Stop it, I regret it already. You want to sulk in peace for once, and you miss the sensation of the millennium."

"But the evening has only just begun. We're both still way too sober. And they haven't even played T.Rex yet."

"You with your fucking Bolan all the time." Sirius punched him roughly in the stomach and Remus backed away with a loud "Oi!", and rubbed the spot.

"Someone has to keep getting his message out, Pads. Not everyone, especially not purebloods, have the privilege of being blessed with such strikingly good taste in music."

"Just shut your mouth, or you'll catch the next punch right away."

"God forbid." Remus couldn't suppress his grin.

Sirius looked at him, and Remus couldn't quite interpret his expression. Then he suddenly averted his gaze and closed the window.

"Shall we go down?" Remus spoke a little more quietly, not sure why himself.

Sirius nodded and walked past Remus towards the door, lightly brushing his shoulder. Remus, as usual, tried to ignore the goosebumps that formed at the slightest touch with his best friend.

Sirius walked up to the door, then stopped.

"Are you coming?" he asked quietly, without turning around.

Remus cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure and get his good mood back out.

"Right behind you."

And then they opened the door back into the noisy, exhausting world.

***

Remus was not the classic party-goer, he was not self-confident enough for that. Thanks to his father's genes, he had grown much too early, much too tall, and to this day he struggled to move his lanky body so that it didn't look ridiculous.

But if he reached the right alcohol level and the music was right - which he would personally make sure of - then the trained observer could definitely spot him on the dance floor.

Sirius was greeted like a superstar in the common room. People were cheering, hugging him, and shoving firewhiskey into his hands. Sirius grinned at them winningly and let his fans pull him into the fray.

Remus, meanwhile, dove between the pats on the back and looked for a place out of the line of fire where he could drink alcohol as undisturbed as possible. To his delight, there was an empty seat next to Marlene McKinnon on the couch.

"Thought you'd gone to bed," Marlene greeted him in her usual direct manner as he plopped down on the couch next to her with a mug of mead.

"Oh come on, not today." He made himself comfortable and took a sip. "Today I'm going all the way."

Marlene looked at him knowingly, a smirk on her lips. "Remus, we both know that's not true."

"Oh nonsense!" objected Remus, but had to laugh himself.

Marlene sat back and let her gaze wander around the noisy common room, while a couple of self-conscious fourth-years were currently trying to sing along to the verse on *Paranoid* by Black Sabbath.

"I'm not really in the mood myself today, though. Maybe it's this stupid wine, but I'm just now really realizing that this is our last night here."

"Not you too" Remus sighed. "Sirius was already in such a melancholy mood just now, too. It's the last night, we'll have time for goodbye pain tomorrow!"

"Wow, so level-headed, serious Remus really wants to party tonight?" She looked amused.

"Sure." Remus took another big gulp. The mead tasted a little too good today. He looked around the common room, searching for the two lovebirds from earlier. "Have you seen James and Lily?"

Marlene looked at him mischievously. "They disappeared a few minutes ago. Probably looking for someplace undisturbed."

"I'm telling you, finally. They've been hard to take the last few weeks."

"Oh, yes," Marlene agreed with him, taking a sip from her cup. Without Remus wanting it, his eyes wandered to Sirius, who already seemed to have let the firewhiskey go to his head. Cheeks flushed, he played air guitar to the opening notes of *Iron Man*, fifth and sixth-years around him cheering as if he were Tony Iommi himself. Sirius hung in there, leaning forward, his black curls playfully following his rhythmic movements. A confident smile played around his lips.

Remus couldn't take his eyes off it. There was no one at Hogwarts, probably not even in all of Britain, who had as much sex appeal as Sirius Black. He drank several sips in a row to moisten his suddenly dry throat.

He felt Marlene nudge him in the side with her elbow. "Careful you don't start drooling."

Remus tore his gaze away from Sirius and looked at Marlene with wide eyes. She just smiled knowingly. "When are you going to tell him?"

Remus anxiously checked to see if anyone might be listening in before shaking his head. "I don't know. It's complicated." It still felt strange to talk to Marlene about it, he had been guarding this secret like a treasure for over a year. But Marlene was just too observant.

"You think so? Actually, it all sounds very simple."

Remus shook his head again, resisting the urge to look at Sirius again. "Things are really good between us again right now. It took ages for the Snape and James thing to blow over. I don't want to...mess that up again."

"Why would you?" Marlene always made things sound so obvious, it drove Remus crazy.

"Look at him!" By that he meant not only Sirius himself, but his fan club. The good looking girls who adored him, who hung around him and craved his attention. Remus knew Sirius enjoyed that kind of attention. How could a werewolf disfigured by scars stand up to it? Not to mention that Remus was a guy, not a busty blonde girl.

"Oh, Remus." Marlene sounded exhausted. "I really wonder how you got such good grades all these years. As dense as you are sometimes."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She gently pinched his side. "Tell him. Trust me."

Just the thought made Remus's heart skip a beat. He couldn't bring himself to do that, no way. Sirius wasn't like him. Sirius was in a different league in so many ways.

Remus was already glad he got to watch him from the distance.

"Changing the subject," Remus quipped, hoping his face wasn't too red. Marlene looked at him silently for a while before she showed mercy and didn't persist.

Remus filled himself the second cup and conjured up a new record in the player, which magically amplified began to resound David Bowie's dulcet voice around the room. The crowd loved it. That was the beauty of drunken teenagers: Their rampant enthusiasm for the smallest things.

Remus talked with Marlene for a while, and a little later they were joined by Mary MacDonald. Together they watched the completely drunk Peter as he performed his staggering dance and seemed to move in completely different spheres. They snorted loudly into their cups several times, barely hiding their giggles.

Remus laughed until his stomach hurt. He hadn't felt this good in a long time. God, he was going to miss them both.

As the evening went on and Remus had stopped counting his cups, his moment had also come to show off his dancing skills to the crowd.

Sirius, who was no less drunk, greeted him loudly as if he had returned after a year-long journey. He reached out to Remus to include him in the dance circle, but Remus raised his index finger with a solemn expression and urged Sirius to be patient. He waved his wand erratically and put in a new record. Not one, *the* record. Tanx by T.Rex.

He waited for the needle to find the right song before lowering his finger and allowing Sirius to approach. When Sirius realized what song was playing, he laughed. "Moony, you're really..."

"This one's for you, Marc!!!" roared Remus slurring his words, pointing his finger to the ceiling and starting to move to *20th Century Boy*.

Sirius, meanwhile, was laughing so hard that he had to lean forward and rest his hands on his knees. The sound of his laughter penetrated

even Remus's alcohol-addled brain and made his heart beat faster. But he could not let himself be diverted from his mission and dedicated this dance entirely to his deceased idol.

After Sirius had calmed down again, he joined Remus's dance, clearly smoother and more confident, but still in his rhythm. Remus savored every moment, it was as if the annoying third-years around them didn't even exist, as if it was just Sirius and him.

When the last chorus rang out, they stared at each other euphorically, eyes wide, and roared together, "*20th century tooooy, I wanna be your booooy!*" It was great. As the final guitar riff faded away, they looked at each other grinning and Remus felt his insides tremble.

He loved this boy so much, he couldn't put it into words.

Their moment came to an abrupt end when James and Lily stumbled into the common room, red-cheeked and visibly disheveled. James had a silly grin on his face and when Sirius recognized his best friend, there was no stopping him. "PRONGS! GET OVER HERE NOW!"

He grabbed James, who was caught completely off guard, and pulled him along with him, shoving a drink into his hand first and beginning to whisper insistently to him. Remus shook his head and turned to Lily, who was standing a bit lost on the sidelines.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked politely, hoping he wasn't slurring his words too much. She looked at him, amused. "Excuse me?" and proved him wrong.

Wordlessly, he conjured a cup in her hand and filled it with mead. She nodded thankfully. After a moment of awkward silence, he leaned towards her and mustered all his remaining concentration to say reasonably clearly, "I'm... very happy for you."

Lily's face beamed. "I can't really believe it yet."

"Neither can we... We thought... James wsa hoplss cs."

He could tell by the look on Lily's face that she hadn't understood a word, but she didn't ask further and just smiled politely. Remus left it at that and returned to the thing he did best in his current state: awkward dancing.

It wasn't long before James and Sirius had finished whispering and joined him. Even Peter staggered over to them at some point and they danced for a while as a foursome, another moment Remus never wanted to forget. Their paths would not part after school, as they all planned to join the Order. But it would never be like this again.

Damn, now he was getting melancholic too.

The next few hours blurred before Remus's eyes, but he was having the time of his life. He danced, drank, and forgot the seriousness of life. It felt good. It might have been the last time.

The next clear moment Remus had was in the bathroom of their dormitory, when he squatted next to Sirius, who was vomiting into the toilet. Being quite the good friend, he held his hair and patted his back.

"Urgh, that bloody firewhiskey," Sirius cursed between chokes. Remus knew exactly why he kept his hands off it. In fifth year, it had led to several nasty situations. But Sirius always wanted to be extra sure about such things.

After Sirius was done, Remus helped him stand and supported him so he could wash up at the sink. Remus was still drunk himself, but he tried to pull himself together so that he could get Sirius safely to bed.

Sirius was just under half a head shorter than him, but if he wanted to, he could make himself damn difficult. Dragging him to the bedroom made Remus groan with exhaustion.

He pulled aside the curtain of his bed and put Sirius down as gently as possible. As he tried to sit up again, he was roughly grabbed by Sirius and pulled into a tight hug. It took Remus a moment to realize the situation he was in. When he felt Sirius pressing against him and his arms wrapped around him tightly, he was abruptly sober again.

"I'm so glad I have you, Moony," Sirius mumbled, and the warm breath on his ear gave Remus goosebumps. "Please don't ever leave me."

Then Sirius released him again, and when he turned away from Remus's ear, it almost felt - and Remus prayed he hadn't imagined it - as if his lips were grazing Remus's cheek. A jolt of electricity went through him, and he braced himself on his hands staring excitedly at Sirius. But he had already closed his eyes and was on his way into a deep alcoholic slumber.

Remus felt disappointment welling up inside him, but had to smile in spite of it all. Shaking his head, he took off Sirius's shoes and covered him up, not without taking one last, drawn-out look at him.

Sirius wouldn't remember it the next day. It was hardly worth mentioning either, a small, intimate moment, another of Sirius's gushing expressions of affection. But for Remus, it was *the* moment. The one that was enough to make him put his arm over his face in his own bed a little while later and giggle like a crushing 12-year-old girl. The one that reinforced his utopian dream that maybe *Sirius Black* felt the same way he did.

On his last night at Hogwarts, Remus Lupin fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'The Flesh Failures (Let the Sunshine in)' by Galt MacDermot and Tom Pierson

That was it for the first chapter! I wanted to start this story on a positive note, I hope I succeeded. :)

[FYI: I mentioned Marc Bolan several times in this chapter. For those who are not familiar with him: He was the singer of T.Rex and quite famous in Britain in the 70s, but died tragically in a car crash in 1977 at only 29 years old. He had a big influence on the music industry and is credited as one of the inventors of Glam Rock.]

See ya! :)

Chapter 2: Layla

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Let's make the best of the situation

Before I finally go insane

Please don't say we'll never find a way

And tell me all my love's in vain

Sirius Black hated being alone. That was one of the first things Remus had learned about his best friend. Over the course of their school years, Sirius had gotten better at hiding his true feelings, but Remus had known him long enough to see behind the facade.

He still remembered the loud, eleven-year-old boy who had whispered in the dormitory at night during their first week that he would have rather come to Slytherin. The one who cried quietly in his bed when his family wrote him letters calling him a disgrace.

He also remembered the boy who was devastated that his brother got selected into Slytherin. Who clung to James like he was drowning. Who got angry every time he felt he was left out. That Sirius was still there. Better hidden, but still just as vulnerable.

Maybe that was the reason why Remus had finally agreed to the move.

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Sirius helped Remus carry his last moving box into the apartment. It hadn't been much, since he didn't have many belongings, most of it was his records and a few well-worn books that he just couldn't part with. They maneuvered the box up the stairs, into the sparse guest room, which with a little work would hopefully soon look the way

Remus envisioned it.

So far, there was only a bed, an antique-looking closet made of light wood, and an empty bookshelf. It was obvious that Sirius didn't have many guests over.

"If you want, you can unpack your stuff in peace, I'll cook us some dinner in the meantime."

"Wow, to hear that phrase come out of your mouth," Remus quipped, rubbing his tired eyes. His last transformation two nights earlier still hung in his bones.

"You'll be amazed, Moony. In the last six months, I've become a stunning housewife."

Remus struggled to keep a serious face. "Impressive."

Sirius crossed his arms. "Stop that!"

"Stop what?"

"That undertone! You'd be surprised!"

Remus nodded with mock insistence. "I can't wait."

"I'll throw you right back out."

"You're not." Remus smiled mischievously and began clearing out the first box with his clothes.

There was silence for a while and Remus felt Sirius's gaze on him.

"Do you need any help cooking?" Remus asked at some point as he became hyperaware of the situation.

"No, thanks."

When Sirius still hadn't budged after a while, Remus frowned and turned to him.

"Then what's the matter?"

"Nothing." Sirius seemed to snap out of his trance and turned to leave. However, not without dropping a casual, "I'm glad you're here."

Remus knew there had been nothing casual about that sentence. He

watched Sirius hurriedly descend the stairs, which creaked loudly as he did. Sometimes he really was an idiot.

A stupid, stubborn, gorgeous idiot.

Remus took his time putting his things away. Despite his exhaustion, he didn't switch to magic either, because it did a better job at keeping his mind occupied. Since a small, nagging voice in his head kept asking if it was really a good idea to move in with his secret crush, just because Sirius couldn't even stand being alone in his new apartment for half a year.

Of course, it also had its advantages: Sirius refused to accept rent *("Do you know how much money Uncle Alphard left me?"*) and so Remus could save his Muggle part-time job and concentrate more on his work in the Order.

On the other hand, that had helped him to feel normal for a few hours a week. Not thinking about the war, or Voldemort.

And also the distance from Sirius had done him good, as much as Remus hated to admit it. His feelings for him had not improved in the last few months, quite the opposite. He still managed to pull off his usual banter with him, but if he looked at Sirius for too long, his knees would get weak. If he smelled his shampoo as he walked by, he wanted to bury his face in his hair. If Sirius laughed, his heart would stop.

It was going to be hell living with him.

After he finished unpacking his clothes, he carefully peeled his record player out of the second box and set it on the floor.

In a pathetic attempt to further drown his rising doubts, he plugged it in, fished the first record off the stack, and put it on. As soon as he heard the first notes of *I Kissed a Teacher*, he focused only on that and began to place his remaining records makeshiftly on the bookshelf. He really needed more furniture.

ABBA actually helped take his mind off things. Even though he mostly just raved about his rock idols in front of Sirius, he secretly couldn't deny that *Dancing Queen* had a catchy tune.

He gently cleared his pretentious literary classics, humming along softly. He then rehung the most important posters, one of Marc Bolan, of course, one of the Stones, and a large one of Black Sabbath. It had taken him quite a bit of finesse to get them off the walls of his old apartment unscathed.

Some would argue that at almost 19, he was already past the age of having posters of idols on the walls. Remus disagreed.

When he had put all his things away, he lay down on the bed for a moment and stretched out his aching limbs.

His body shouldn't hurt like this at that age, shouldn't feel permanently like he'd gotten under a car. But neither should he be fighting in a war at 18 and throwing away his career plans because in a few months there might not even be a Ministry of Magic. Remus was still too young for many things. Maybe that's why he felt so old.

"*Daaarling*, dinner's ready!" Sirius called upstairs later in a sugary sweet voice, yanking Remus out of his slumber.

Startled, he straightened up and took a few seconds to remember where he was and who this poor imitation of a 50s housewife was coming from. Completely out of it, he ran his hands through his hair and struggled to get up.

Absentmindedly, he cleared his throat and growled back, "Coming, honey!" in his deepest, raspiest macho voice. A familiar laugh rang out to him as he stumbled dazedly down the stairs.

He was greeted by the finest cuisine: spaghetti with tomato sauce. Though Remus had to give Sirius credit for the fact that it was still better than what he had expected.

As he sat down, he tried not to focus too much on the fact that he was having dinner with *Sirius Black*, who had cooked *for him*, in their *shared* flat. He loaded his plate generously and tried a forkful. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Sirius's expectant look.

"Wow, Pads. That's not even bad!" Remus praised him teasingly, earning an unexpectedly genuine smile in return.

"Told you!" Self-satisfied, Sirius began to eat, reminding Remus of a defiant schoolchild who had been proven right about a trivial thing. It

was so endearing that Remus had to avert his gaze.

The lump in his throat he felt all at once made it hard for him to eat. He did it anyway. For Sirius's sake. Just like he always did.

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Remus stumbled out of the Potter family fireplace, and it took every ounce of his concentration not to crash into the floor.

With arms flailing, he fought for balance and only found it again after a few terrible seconds. The bright smoke receded from his field of vision and he realized that James was waiting for him, grinning broadly.

"Moony! Oh, better make room now, Padfoot is-" he began, but it was too late. Remus felt himself being knocked from behind and stumbled badly once more. Pain shot up his already battered back.

"Sorry, Moony! Fuck," cursed Sirius, who caught himself a bit more elegantly than Remus had before, but also seemed to be rattled. "Wow, I probably should have gone for a place with a bigger fireplace."

"Definitely!" scolded Remus, rubbing his back as if he had lumbago.

James looked amused. "Well, at least you're connected to the Flea Network now. That's something."

Sirius nodded and ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "The protection around the flat seems to be finished too, Moody took another look at it yesterday."

"Very good." James gestured behind him to the magically enlarged dining table, where over a dozen empty chairs stood ready. "You can make yourselves comfortable, the others should be arriving any minute."

Remus didn't need to be asked twice and got himself and Sirius out of the line of fire. They chose two chairs at the center of the table and took their seats.

It wasn't the first meeting of the Order Remus attended, and yet he still felt that same initial nervousness. Ever since he had gotten to

know the people in the Order better, there had always been this lingering anxiety about whether everyone would arrive safely this time.

Lily scared away Remus's thoughts as she came down the stairs and greeted them with a smile. "I'm glad you're here."

Remus and Sirius gave her a fleeting hug and she sat down next to Remus. "So, did everything work out with the move?"

Remus shrugged. "Sure, didn't have much stuff, though."

"You should have seen his old dump. Every one of his belongings was practically begging me to save them from the trash."

Remus elbowed him in the side. "It wasn't that bad. But the flat really wasn't that great. Especially in comparison to that half-mansion Sirius treated himself to."

Sirius raised his hands innocently. "You have to enjoy earthly things once in a while."

Lily shook her head with a smile. "James has already told me about it. Looking forward to visiting you guys sometime."

"Likewise!" said Remus. "Have you two settled in well yet?"

Lily nodded, a shy smile on her lips. "Yeah, it's great. Going much better than I had hoped. It all went rather quickly after all."

Remus could only agree. They had just gotten together after Hogwarts and had already moved in together last month. But in the situation they were in, words like hesitation and patience lost more and more of their meaning anyway. Living in the moment, as dramatic as it sounded.

The living room was bathed in green light for a moment as Frank and Alice Longbottom walked out of the fireplace, clearly more light-footed and professional than Remus and Sirius had been before.

James hugged them both gleefully, barely managing two sentences of small talk before lapsing into a conversation with Frank about this year's Quidditch season. Alice just waved and joined Lily, Remus, and Sirius. She looked good, wearing her dark hair short now, and her wide smile dug deep dimples into her cheeks.

Together they exchanged stories about the events of the last weeks, until a little later the Prewett brothers, Dorcas Meadowes, Elphias Doge, Sturgis Podmore, Peter and Marlene arrived as well. Remus was most pleased about the last two. Even though Remus didn't like the thought of knowing so many of his friends were in potential danger, it was nice to have familiar faces among all the serious, careworn expressions.

Finally, the last to arrive was Alastor Moody, scowling and similarly scarred in the face as Remus. He had such a presence that all heads automatically turned to him.

"Good afternoon everyone," he grumbled with a nod to the group, not wasting much time. "Is anyone else missing?"

"No one who hasn't signed off," interjected James's father Fleamont, who had just come out of the kitchen. "We can get right to it."

Determined, all the members sat down at the long table. Finally, the circle was completed by James's mother Euphemia. As always, she smiled warmly at Remus and Sirius as their eyes met.

Moody took a seat at the head of the table and cleared his throat. "Alright, let's get started. Ready Elphias?" He cast a cursory glance at the short, round-faced wizard, who had spread a roll of parchment in front of him and was enchanting a quill.

"Ready to go."

"So. Been a difficult week, as most of you have picked up. There were two Imperius suspicions at the Ministry, some important documents were stolen. Among other things, sensitive data on various Muggle-born witches and wizards."

Dismayed silence. Remus had read about the Imperius cases in the newspaper, but this was the first time he had heard about the missing data.

"The Prime Minister is already taking all necessary steps to properly protect the families, but I fear that will not be enough. Elphias and I have had long exchanges about this. We cannot stand back and do nothing..."

"What is your suggestion?" asked Sturgis Podmore. He had thick, blond hair and rarely the patience to let people speak out.

"We need to step up patrols. Day and night. We need to identify potential targets early and place our guards there."

"Do we even have enough people for that?"

Moody grunted in agreement. "There are some potential new members, and I've been in close contact with them. Edgar Bones, Benjy Fenwick, and Mary MacDonald, among others, want to join."

Remus exchanged a fleeting glance with Sirius.

"If they prove useful, they can take some of the pressure off us. But I don't want to delude you, it's still going to be a rough few weeks. We need to stay one step ahead of the Death Eaters if we want to prevent the worst from happening."

Murmurs of agreement followed. Remus felt his deep-seated anxiety swell. Their probationary period in the Order was over now, at the latest. As if Moody had heard his thoughts, he turned to their small group of graduates.

"You will also participate in the patrols from now on. Elphias and I will come up with a suitable shift schedule so that you will be paired with experienced members at the beginning. So don't worry."

Don't worry. Sure. As if it was that easy.

But he'd known what he was getting into from the start, he couldn't get cold feet now.

"We'll get the plan to you all safely as soon as it's ready. Apart from that, I'd like to go over our scouting results from the last few patrols together, and gathering which targets might be especially tempting for the Death Eaters."

Remus took a deep breath. He felt Sirius's foot brush his and glanced at him. He gave him a small smile, which was probably meant to reassure Remus, but only upset him further. Sirius wasn't exactly the best choice for lowering his tension at the moment.

After a tough hour and a half, they had completed their list of potential targets and Moody declared the meeting over. "Take good care of yourselves. And remember, as soon as anything happens, send a Patronus."

As soon as he could, Remus stood up and stretched his stiff limbs. His bones cracked loudly, making Peter's eyes go wide.

"Did something just break?" he asked worriedly.

Remus just waved it off. "Oh don't worry, you know it's all normal with me."

"I wouldn't sign off on that," Sirius quipped as he walked by and joined James. Remus just rolled his eyes and chatted a bit with Peter, who had landed a post at the Ministry despite the tense security situation.

"It's a really creepy atmosphere there, though. No one's talking about it, but I think they're all very scared," he whispered almost reverently.

"Would be dumb if they weren't," Remus agreed.

Most of the Order didn't stay long and took their leave through the flea network. A short time later, only the Marauders, Marlene, and Lily were still there.

They sat together for a while, talking about more easily digestible topics, like the career plans of their friends and acquaintances from school. It was interesting, but it also made Remus feel kind of sad. Aside from the fact that the war had already robbed him and his friends of a normal life, he would probably never be successful professionally anyway. Surely no one would want a werewolf with them in the office.

He was peripherally aware of how his head was increasingly blocking out the voices of his friends. His gaze fell on the tabletop and fixated on the cracks and blemishes in the grain, which suddenly seemed a thousand times more interesting than the fact that Mary had enrolled in a Muggle university.

Sirius seemed to sense his bad mood and announced their departure not long after. "So sweethearts, Moony and I are taking off. Got some things to do around the flat, Moony can't even manage to put up a closet by himself."

"Yeah, I'm sure I'm the problem here." Remus looked at his friends meaningfully, earning laughter.

"Take care, see you soon," Sirius waved to the group and pulled James into a final, brotherly hug before they climbed into the fireplace.

"Thank you," Remus whispered to him before saying their destination aloud. The last thing he saw before the green flames came was Sirius winking.

***

The days that Remus and Sirius waited for the finished plan felt like a strange limbo.

Sirius was so bored at one point that he even helped Remus further furnish his room. They set up the desk and dresser and made it an unspoken competition to see which of them needed less magic to do it. Remus knew from the start that he would win, after all, he was familiar with the Muggle world thanks to his mother and had held a hammer in his life before.

Sirius tried to cover up his cluelessness and was particularly eager, but Remus quickly saw through him. The eagerness eventually ended up making the dresser slightly crooked and the top drawer creak suspiciously when opened. Sirius and Remus frowned at their handiwork, and Remus crossed his arms.

"I don't know if it's supposed to look like that."

Sirius sighed. "I'm sure not." He rose resignedly and drew his wand. "I'll fix it."

Remus looked at the pitiful piece of furniture and shook his head, smiling. "Oh well, leave it like that. It's kind of charming, in a way."

Sirius frowned at him and lowered his wand again. "You sure? I wouldn't use the top drawer if I were you."

"Like I'd get the others full of my stuff in the first place."

"You don't have to live like a Tibetan monk, by the way, Moony. You're welcome to buy some stuff."

"I do," Remus said, pointing to his well-stocked bookshelf, where records and paperbacks were lined up, indicating exceptionally good taste.

Sirius followed his gesture with his gaze and shook his head

theatrically. "What would you do without me?" He ran his hand through his hair and looked towards the desk, which was only half set up. Remus didn't see his face, but he could roughly imagine how little desire he had to finish the thing. Smiling indulgently, he drew his own wand and stood beside it.

"I'd have my peace, quite a wonderful thought." With a casual movement, Remus conjured up the desk and levitated it into place, a process that took perhaps 10 seconds.

Sirius shook his head. "That would be terribly boring." He pushed the desk chair into place and sat heavily on it. "I really don't know how Muggles do it. It takes forever."

Remus snorted in amusement and sat down on his bed. "The first step is certainly less whining."

Sirius stuck his tongue out at him and rose again, emphatically buoyant. "There speaks the great and wise Moony, who before the NEWTs was on the verge of writing a tearful letter of complaint to McGonagall about 'intolerable learning conditions'."

"Yeah, that would have listed you as my first and foremost stressor."

"Oh, so dramatic." He held his hand to his chest in feigned indignation. "I made your school life so much nicer, didn't I? If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have seen any of Hogwarts at all, except for the library and the astronomy tower."

"And I would have saved myself some alcohol poisoning."

"Collateral damage, Moony."

Remus shook his head, trying not to look too closely as Sirius stretched and patted the dust off his trousers.

"Fancy a smoke?" asked Remus casually, staring out the window.

"Sure, why not."

They walked through Sirius's bedroom, which was slightly larger than his, filled with an extra-wide bed, a sprawling dark carpet, and a solid oakwood closet. Sirius really didn't do things by halves.

Sirius opened the door to the balcony, which was bathed in white, almost unreal light from the low winter sun.

Remus squinted his eyes and sat down so that he had the sun at his back. He pulled a fresh pack of cigarettes from his pocket and opened it routinely. He had tried two months without smoking after graduating, but the first official contact with the Order had been enough to make his fingers shaky again. Sirius didn't seem to be doing any better in that matter.

He handed the him a cigarette and lit them both with the help of his wand.

Sirius leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs as he took the first deep drag. The cigarette was perfectly balanced between his long, slender fingers. His hair was disheveled, but in just the right way, as if each strand were lying exactly where it should be. In the bright sunlight, his steel-gray eyes looked almost otherworldly. He looked like a fucking Renaissance sculpture. It was unfair.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Sirius, taking another drag on his cigarette.

Tracing the crook of your neck with my lips, Remus thought.

"Everything. How things will turn out," he said instead.

"Oh, I don't worry about that. It’s all going to be alright. Has to."

He envied that optimism.

At that moment an owl fluttered into their field of vision and settled on the wooden railing. Surprised, Remus clamped his cigarette between his lips and took the small letter it carried in its beak. On the seal Remus recognized a squiggly "M". His heart leapt.

"Pretty brave, just sending an owl," Sirius commented, frowning. Remus nodded, hastily breaking the seal and fishing the paper out of the envelope. When he had unfolded it, he took it in one hand and the cigarette out of his mouth with the other. It took him a moment to understand what he was looking at.

"It's encrypted. According to Doge's old system. Guess they trusted that no one but us would figure it out."

He flicked the ashes over the railing and tried to recall the encryption code. The plan was for the next two weeks, he understood fairly quickly: for each day, four teams of two at different key locations they had defined at the last meeting. For each team of two, the

abbreviations of their names were given, two letters offset in the alphabet. For first shift the next morning, the abbreviations were HN and UD.

It took him a moment to get the letters shifted correctly.

Sirius, meanwhile, was growing impatient. "Are you done anytime soon? I want to take a look, too."

FL and SB. Frank Longbottom and Sirius Black.

With a frown, he handed Sirius the letter. It was to be expected, really. Sooner or later they were all going to get their turn, there was no way around it. Still, Remus wasn't comfortable with it, not at all.

It took Sirius a moment to figure out the system, and he finally laughed when he saw his name at the top. Remus sensed his uncertainty.

"Well, off to the deep end," he quipped. Remus didn't feel like laughing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: "Layla" by Derek and the Dominos

Remus is PINING. (But who can blame him lmao)
Hope you liked the chapter! It’s pretty much still scene-setting but I really had fun writing it.

See ya!

Chapter 3: Diego Maradona

Chapter Notes

CW Injury

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I smoke, lose and find myself

In your arms, as it always was

I love you, but I can't tell you

It was early in the morning when Sirius got ready for his shift. Remus had gotten up with him, even though Sirius had assured him a dozen times that it wasn't necessary.

"I was going to get up early today anyway and go to the record store."

"Why, do they give a discount if you show up before seven in the morning?"

"No, but it's less busy then." Remus knew how stupid that excuse sounded. But he also couldn't just admit that he had been lying awake half the night with the image of Sirius being attacked by a Death Eater in his mind.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Whatever you say." He had made himself scrambled eggs for breakfast and put the used pan in the sink. As Remus had already noted, that was the equivalent of doing the dishes for Sirius. This morning Remus wasn't complaining about it.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked.

Sirius shook his head, a thin smile on his lips. "No thanks, Mum."

Remus tried to keep his worry a little more in check. "Well, then..."

Sirius slipped into his heavy coat, which hopefully would hold up against the sub-zero temperatures outside. Then he turned to Remus. "Here we go then."

"Try not to die."

Sirius laughed out and hugged Remus warmly. "You should be a little less dramatic, Moony. This is going to be a routine from now on."

"Not for me." Remus enjoyed the second he felt Sirius in his arms and then looked at him anxiously. One last quick exchange of glances, then Sirius turned to leave.

"Darling, cook us something nice to eat until I get back from my extremely dangerous work" said Sirius, this time in his greasiest snob dialect, raising his hand in farewell as he walked. As soon as the front door slammed shut behind him, Remus heard the characteristic crack and knew that Sirius had disapparated.

The next few hours passed agonizingly slowly. Remus washed up, he actually visited the record store and picked up the debut album by a new band called Van Halen, bought groceries, prepared a large stew, and smoked at least ten cigarettes. And even then, it was only noon. At one point he was lying back on the wide, mustard-yellow couch, staring at the shift schedule for the hundredth time. It was his turn tomorrow night, along with Sturgis Podmore, outside the home of Muggle-born Thomas Roberts, a high-ranking employee in the Improper Use of Magic Office. A delicate target.

He sat up and put the note away. Sirius was right. He couldn't let himself get so involved. This was their job, this was what they had chosen to do. Someone had to stand up to Voldemort. Sighing, Remus stood up and shuffled lazily to the balcony. His own arguments never sounded convincing to his ears. Sirius was in charge of optimism.

He lit the next cigarette.

***

"I'm back, my dearest Moony darling," Sirius trilled, coming stomping into the living room with his cloak billowing. Remus had just started the same page in his book for the third time and looked up in relief.

"Thank goodness." He put the book aside and rose. Sirius took off his

snowy clothes and shook the half-thawed snowflakes out of his hair.

"So how was it?"

"Super boring. I'm telling you, nothing happens at all," Sirius snorted in annoyance and threw himself onto the couch. Remus didn't know if he was just saying that to make him feel better.

"Not even in Diagon Alley?"

Sirius accioed a bottle of water into his hand and drank greedily. Afterwards, the set the half-empty bottle down on the coffee table. "Trust me. A few strange people always come and go from Nocturn Alley, but they were just minding their own business."

"That sounds reassuring."

"It is," he said emphatically, glancing at Remus from the side. "You don't have to worry about it."

"I'll try," Remus smiled and headed towards the kitchen. "Feel like eating?"

His grin was answer enough.

***

The weather was bad when Remus apparated to the meeting place with Podmore the next evening. He wore three layers of clothing and a thick scarf, but the freezing wind blew relentlessly and their alarm post near the house offered little protection either.

"Greetings," Podmore murmured, guiding a hand to his hat. He was similarly thickly wrapped, and the first snowflakes were already clinging to his blond beard.

"Good evening," Remus replied politely, joining the other wizard as he started to move.

"Everyone does things a little differently when it comes to patrols. I like to keep moving," Podmore whispered. "Especially in weather like this."

Remus welcomed that. They identified a suitable route that was illuminated enough by the distant streetlights that they wouldn't

stumble, but still kept them hidden. So they made irregular laps around the house, and Remus watched as one by one the lights inside went out. All but one.

"The Death Eaters must have sent Roberts numerous threatening messages over the past few weeks. He's one of Voldemort's biggest adversaries in the Ministry," Podmore muttered, and Remus continued to gaze at the lone light upstairs. "I think it's only a matter of time before the attack comes."

Remus nodded thoughtfully, though Podmore probably couldn't see that in the dark. Now that he was in the thick of it, the fear was almost completely gone. He felt awake, more awake than he had in days.

"Then we need to be ready."

"That's the spirit."

The hours passed relatively quickly, despite the cold and the monotonous task. Remus chatted with Podmore, learning that he had graduated from Hogwarts just four years before them and had been in the Order ever since.

"You get used to it quickly, believe me. I almost wet my pants at first, but you learn to deal with the fear."

Sometimes there was an unpleasantly lecturing undertone in his words, but Remus still liked Podmore. He was definitely more pleasant to deal with than people like Moody or Daedalus Diggel.

"Why did you join the Order?" asked Remus at one point. "Did Dumbledore approach you directly?"

"No, I'm-" He interrupted himself and raised his hand warningly, his gaze fixed on the darkness. Remus looked at him in irritation for a moment, then followed his gaze. First he saw nothing, then, almost imperceptibly, a shadow in the bushes. Remus clutched his wand.

For a few, eternal seconds, they were as quiet as possible. Remus stared into the darkness, trying to make out more, but to no avail.

"STUPEFY!" screamed Podmore all at once, and Remus was scared out of his wits. A flash of red raced forward, revealing a single figure, in

long, black robes, escaping the spell by a hair.

"Lumos!" Remus yelled immediately, as he recovered from the shock. He waved his wand and shot a ball of light into the air, illuminating the surroundings.

The figure had stumbled as a result of Podmore's spell, but quickly regained its footing. Remus didn't recognize their face, but he was sure he was looking at a Death Eater.

"Expell-" Remus put in, but he wasn't fast enough. A loud "CONFRINGO!" whipped through the air and a yellow light whizzed past Remus dangerously close.

Before he could duck away, the curse hit a tree behind them, causing it to explode in a marrow-shattering blast. Remus was knocked off his feet by the force of the blast and fell to the ground. Sharp pain drove through his thigh and shoulder blade.

His ears rang, he felt dizzy, but the adrenaline made him pick himself up in a flash. Wildly, he stretched his wand from him and searched for the Death Eater, but he had disappeared.

"Has... disapparated," Podmore groaned, rising much more slowly than Remus. Remus limped to him and helped him up. His whole body shook with tension.

"Are you okay?" he asked, scanning Podmore for injuries. There was a small splinter of wood stuck in his upper arm, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

"Yeah, everything's fine, just still spinning a bit."

"Better sit still for a moment, then," Remus suggested. "I'll keep an eye out for any more to show up."

"No, don't worry. That was just a scout. We get that a lot. They send individuals to scout out their next targets. We scared him off."

"He was... strong," Remus murmured in awe. He had never experienced such a violent blast.

"Yes, most of them are," Podmore agreed, rubbing his temples. "But so are we."

Remus just nodded, noticing how his body began to ache after fighting

off the initial shock. He took the weight off his left leg. Podmore beside him drew in a sharp breath.

"Lupin, you're bleeding!" he exclaimed worriedly.

"It's no big deal," Remus waved it off, but lost his balance at that very moment. Stars danced in his field of vision as he plopped backwards onto the ground and a sharp pain ran through his leg.

"Shit, that looks bad. I'll get you to St. Mungo's!"

"All... good," Remus muttered, but he suddenly didn't feel that way at all. His whole body began to go crazy and he was shaking like a leaf.

Podmore gripped him firmly by the uninjured shoulder and Remus was put through the meat grinder for a second as they diapparated together.

The next few minutes blurred before Remus's eyes. He watched Podmore hand him over to the nurses, who fed him a bitter-tasting potion and laid him face down on a gurney. For a moment everything went black, then Remus suddenly felt a brutal pain in his thigh and cried out loudly.

"Don't worry, it'll be better in a minute. We just need to remove the splinters before we can heal you," a nurse calmly explained to him, and it took only a few moments before his shoulder was maltreated as well. Remus wanted nothing more than to pass out.

"Mr. Lupin, almost there. The pain potion should take effect any moment now. Then you can sleep in peace."

Remus heard murmuring behind him and felt his wounds being treated and bandaged. The pain subsided instantly.

He was laid on his side and could finally breathe more freely. Dazed, he saw a doctor in front of him, shining a light into his eyes and scanning the back of his head. He said something, but Remus couldn't put the words together in his head in any meaningful way. The potion slowly began to take effect and Remus became unbearably tired.

"You can go to sleep now," was the last thing he heard, and he obeyed.

***

When Remus woke up, he felt surprisingly well. Dull pain shot through his back and he felt the bandages around his wounds, but it was no comparison to before.

He rubbed his eyes and tried to sit up, but was pushed back by a determining hand. It was Podmore, with deep circles under his eyes, but looking fine.

"Take it easy, kid. You've had a rough night."

"I'm fine," Remus muttered, but obeyed and lay back down. "What time is it?"

"Almost 3 pm. You slept for 12 hours. They really didn't skimp on the sleeping pills."

"Did- was-" stuttered Remus, "Sirius?" he finally managed, earning an amused look from the blond wizard.

"Yeah, I informed the whole Order, the Roberts know too. Don't worry, I also told them right away that you're stable and just need to rest a bit." Remus nodded gratefully. He didn't want his friends to worry about him unnecessarily.

"That didn't stop Black and Potter from coming here right away, though. They were there for several hours, Black even until a few minutes ago. He looked miserable, so I told him to go home and freshen up. Nearly smacked me in the face."

Remus couldn't help but grin at the thought. On the other hand, his guilty conscience was also kicking in. If Sirius had worried nearly as much as Remus had the day before, then the last few hours must have been torture for him.

With a throaty laugh, Podmore brought Remus out of his thoughts again. "Now that's what I call jumping out of the frying pan into the fire!" he laughed. "Welcome to the Order." He held out his hand to him. "Sturgis."

"Remus," he replied. He still couldn't quite grasp what had happened yesterday. Was this the "daily bread" the other members were always talking about?

"Here, drink something," Sturgis suggested, holding out a cup of water to him. Remus accepted gratefully. After drinking greedily, he placed the cup on the nightstand.

"What did Moody actually..." he started, but was interrupted by a loud "MOONY!".

An excited Sirius stood in the doorway, pale in the face and with damp hair. He ran towards him and before Remus knew it, he found himself in a fierce hug.

Regardless of his aching shoulder, Remus returned the hug even more tightly. The smell of Sirius's shampoo rose to his nose. He inhaled deeply.

Sturgis laughed and rose. "Fine, I'll be on my way then. Get well soon, and let me know when you're out of the hospital."

Remus blinked at him kindly over Sirius's shoulder and watched him leave the room.

"You can't do that to me," Sirius muttered so softly that Remus barely heard him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered back, stroking Sirius's hair. He hoped Sirius didn't sense his wildly pounding heart.

Eventually Sirius reluctantly let go of him and looked at him worriedly. "Are you feeling better?"

Remus nodded, swallowing with difficulty. Sirius was far too close to him.

"I feel fine... I'll talk to the doctors later about getting me out as soon as possible."

"Don't rush it," Sirius warned, but Remus shook his head.

"Really, I'm fine. It wasn't that bad."

Sirius didn't look convinced. "It sounded quite different when Podmore's Patronus arrived at my house yesterday. He said you guys were hit by an explosion."

"Yeah, explosions always sound dramatic", waved Remus off, trying to cover the goosebumps that formed on his skin at the thought. "But it really wasn't that..."

"Moony," Sirius said seriously, leaning his forehead against Remus's shoulder. "Don't lie. You know I hate that."

He put a hand on his back. "I'm sorry. Won't happen again."

***

The doctor didn't let Remus go home until the next afternoon and gave him numerous ointments to further speed up the healing process. Sirius put them in his bag and held out his hand to Remus. Remus didn't trust himself to apparate again yet, so he left it to Sirius. A terrible second later, they were back in front of their flat.

"Make yourself comfortable on the couch, Moony," Sirius instructed Remus once they were through the front door and had taken off their coats. "You shall want for nothing at Maison Black."

Remus smiled quietly and walked cautiously to the couch, careful not to put too much weight on his left leg. The wounds had healed nicely, but Remus still felt a little wobbly on his feet.

While he was putting his feet up, he heard Sirius doing things in the kitchen. "Fancy some pizza?" he heard him call out.

"Of course," he replied, already looking forward to it. The food at St. Mungo's had been anything but tasty.

A few minutes later, Sirius came back into the living room and put the ointments on the coffee table. "The pizza will be a few more minutes. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Remus stretched extensively before smiling cheekily. "One bring me the record player and a good book!" At that, he was lolling around like a Roman senator who had just started the third carafe of wine.

Sirius looked like he was considering giving him the middle finger, but finally left it at a sigh. "And which record does Your Majesty want to hear?"

"Doesn't matter," Remus smiled. "They're all great."

Sighing heavily, Sirius set the record player on the floor a little later. "The things I do for you," he muttered, plugging it in. A little too rough for Remus's taste, he put the record on and lowered the needle

to the beginning. The Beach Boys. Perfect.

"You should think again about that commode, by the way," Sirius said, amused, and made his way to the kitchen. "Just had another look at it. It looks really pathetic."

"Exactly my style." Remus was sure now, at the latest, that he would never change that thing.

While Sirius was busy in the kitchen, Remus's gaze fell on the shift schedule, already crumpled from so much use.

He picked it up and scanned the next few shifts. It would be his turn again tomorrow night, but Moody had taken him out for the whole week. Sirius was on tomorrow night, along with Fabian Prewett, back in Diagon Alley.

"Voilà, mon cher," Sirius purred as he sweepingly placed the plate in front of Remus.

"Wow, even cut already, you really are too good to me."

"Told you."

Remus took a bite and was in heaven.

***

The record had already gone through, but Remus was too lazy to reach for his wand. He and Sirius were half lying on the couch, in a mutual food coma, and Remus kept dozing off briefly. It was so peaceful, Remus wanted the moment to never end.

"We can't forget the ointments. Doc said three times a day," Sirius muttered lethargically at one point and Remus grumbled annoyed.

"You're right." With supreme effort, he sat up and fished for the first ointment. "Gently apply to affected area, let air dry for 10 minutes," it said. When he realized what that meant, he paused. His shoulder blade. That was not...

"Give it here already. I'll do it," Sirius said far too pragmatically for Remus's taste, snatching the pack from his hand.

"Take your clothes off," he added casually as he read through the back of the package. A jolt of electricity went through Remus. He laughed awkwardly.

"All right, Casanova," he tried to save the situation for himself, but he only earned an annoyed look. Meekly, he took off his shirt while Sirius took the ointment out of the package and put some on his hand.

Out of old habit, Remus turned away slightly, arms pulled forward, covering what was possible.

Sirius tilted his head slightly and looked at him sympathetically. "Moony, you don't have to hide. I've seen you shirtless more than once."

"Well," Remus grumbled, "the scars aren't necessarily getting any less."

"You should know by now that I don't care. You're beautiful the way you are."

Another one of those Sirius-statements. Right now, in the worst possible situation. Remus swallowed, wondering what he had done to deserve this.

Because he didn't trust his mouth, he wordlessly turned around so that Sirius reached his shoulder. Remus tried not to flinch when he felt the cold ointment.

Sirius began to spread the substance with gentle movements, and Remus, mustering all his willpower, forced himself to think of bad, unattractive, non-erotic things. It was hell.

And then he was so close to him, too. He felt his warm breath creeping over his back and got goosebumps from it.

"Is the ointment cold?" asked Sirius, who must have noticed.

"M-hm," Remus said hoarsely. For a moment, every inch of his body fixated on Sirius's fingers stroking his reddened skin, almost caressing his newest scar. Remus exhaled a shaky breath.

"Are you okay?" asked Sirius hesitantly. Remus nodded exuberantly and bit his tongue.

"Remus?"

Remus. He only called him that when he was worried or pissed off. He

felt a hand on his shoulder. His body reacted out of reflex and shook it off. Sirius backed away a bit and looked hit, which gave Remus the next sting.

"Is it because of the attack? Is it haunting you?"

Stop caring, or you'll kill me.

Sirius reached out to him again, gently this time, a question.

He overcame himself and turned a bit toward Sirius, exposing his probably flushed face, his pinched mouth, his heavy breathing. Sirius moved a little closer, his gray eyes full of concern, and his hands were touching him gently now, first on the shoulder, then on the face.

"What's wrong?"

Remus almost laughed. If he hadn't been on the verge of grabbing that face and kissing it until he forgot his name.

"Nothing," he said, forcing himself to smile. "I'm ... fine."

Sirius nodded slightly, but his hand didn't leave his face. "Alright," he breathed, his eyes darting to Remus's lips for a split second.

That was it. That was too much, that was...

Remus knew it was a mistake. Knew the consequences, had gone over them a thousand times in his mind. And yet, his mind suddenly shut down.

In one fluid motion, he grasped Sirius's face, pulled him close, pressed their lips together. It was a rushed kiss, awkward, full of fear. He felt Sirius stiffen under his hands, just as it had happened thousands of times in Remus's nightmares.

But then everything happened very quickly.

Then he felt fingers clawing into his hair, felt his kiss being returned. He wanted to sigh in relief, but Sirius didn't give him the time. He deepened the kiss, giving it something urgent, almost desperate.

Remus put one hand on the back of Sirius's neck and clawed at his shirt with the other. He felt Sirius's tongue against his lips and opened his mouth willingly. Sirius pressed against him, a soft sigh escaping his lips.

This was really happening. He was kissing Sirius, Sirius was kissing him back, he could feel his velvety black hair under his fingers. Unbelievable. Overcome with desire, he ran a hand under Sirius's shirt, felt the warm, soft skin under his rough hands, and heard Sirius gasp. His new favorite sound.

Suddenly the living room was bathed in blue light, so bright that Remus noticed it through his closed eyes. They jolted apart and Remus saw a Patronus in the shape of a lynx roaming the room. It opened his muzzle and Elphias Doge's voice rang out from it. "*Sirius Black at sunset to the Abbots' estate. Alice Longbottom is out today due to illness."*

It was standard notification. Doge sent Patroni out all the time for such petty things. But Sirius and Remus stared at it like it was a Dementor. When the lynx finally fizzled out, it was as if another spell had been broken as well. Remus turned his gaze to Sirius in his arms, who was staring at him with wide eyes, as if he had awoken from a trance.

For a second they remained still, but then he sensed Sirius's resistance, felt him push away from Remus, and finally let go.

Erratically, Sirius got up from the couch, bumping into the coffee table and knocking over a glass that shattered with a clink. Neither of them paid it any further attention.

"Sirius," Remus croaked awkwardly, half rising from the couch himself and reaching out to him, but Sirius recoiled from him like he was a dangerous animal.

"I... I have to... " he stuttered, naked panic in his eyes. He hurried into the hallway, grabbed his coat, and left without another word. Remus heard him disapparate outside the door.

Suddenly drained of all his energy, he sank back onto the couch, propped his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands.

That was how many of his nightmares had ended, too.

Chapter End Notes

Song lyrics: "Diego Maradona" by Provinz (A German song! Loved that one verse so much so I just had to put it in)

So we had our first kiss. And it really could have gone better... :')

Hope you liked it!

See ya!

Chapter 4: The Chain

Chapter Notes

CW: Violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And if you don't love me now

You will never love me again

I can still hear you saying

You would never break the chain

Sirius did not return that day. Probably he had gone straight to his shift at the Abbots' house after his *escape*. Remus was glad of that for once. He didn't want to face him, didn't know what to say, what Sirius thought of him now. He had returned his kiss, even more than that. But when he had come back to his senses... that panic in his eyes, the flinch from his touch... Remus didn't want to think about it.

He fucked up. He had known from the start how this would end. But he had done it anyway, and this was the result. He was such a fool.

In the evening, Remus dragged himself to the bathroom and took a shower that was far too long and far too hot. He pressed his forehead against the cool tiles and tried to think of something else, but it was impossible. And the incomparable feeling of finally having felt Sirius like this, was forever soiled by the end.

When he was done showering, he dried off and looked at himself in the mirror. Furrowed scars stood out from his skin, each a testament to all that was wrong with him. A petrified expression faced him, his bushy eyebrows drawn together, his eyes red-rimmed, their expression blank. It was pathetic.

He closed his eyes and turned away, dressing hastily, limping out of

the bathroom. He just wanted to go to bed, even though he already knew he wouldn't get a wink of sleep this night. Slowly he was getting used to it.

But he would probably never get used to the feeling that had spread through his chest.

***

It was almost noon when Remus awoke. It had taken him until dawn to finally doze off, and now sleep didn't want to let him go. He struggled to wake up, rubbing his eyes and placing his forearm across his forehead. He didn't want to get up. He wanted it even less when he heard the stairs creak in the hallway, indicating that Sirius was back.

Eventually he forced himself to get up, pulled back the curtains and opened the window briefly. Ice-cold air poured into the room and made him shiver.

Lost in thought, he reached into the closet and grabbed some new clothes, tucked them under his arm and headed for the bathroom. Fortunately, there was no sign of Sirius.

He avoided looking in the mirror as he dressed. He brushed his teeth, washed his face, shaved. All this while staring stubbornly at the sink. He didn't want to know what he looked like, couldn't stand the sight of himself right now.

When he was done, he grabbed the handle of the bathroom door and took one deep breath. It was unavoidable, best he get it over with now.

With one swift movement, Remus opened the door and was nearly scared out of his wits when he saw Sirius standing right in front of him, pale and serious.

"Jesus, Sirius. Don't scare me like that."

Sirius paid no attention to his statement. "Can we talk?"

There it was.

"Sure," he said as casually as he could and cleared his throat.

"Balcony?"

"I don't care."

They put on jackets and stepped out onto the balcony. Wordlessly, Remus handed Sirius a cigarette and lit it. He leaned over the railing and looked out over the snow-covered rooftops of the neighborhood.

Cold wind blew in his face, carrying the cigarette smoke away. Sirius took the same position, at a proper distance, more than usual. Remus was glad he didn't have to look at him.

"How was the shift?" he asked, taking a deep drag that burned in his throat.

"Uneventful," Sirius replied curtly.

"Glad to hear it." He meant that sincerely. His only shift so far had ended in the hospital, after all.

Sirius remained silent. Remus sensed his tension. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius clinging to the railing with his hand.

"Remus..." he finally began, but Remus interrupted him, suddenly realizing that he couldn't bear to hear the words come out of his mouth.

"It's okay," he started, almost crushing the cigarette in his fingers so Sirius wouldn't notice their trembling. "You don't have to say it, I get it."

He felt Sirius's piercing gaze from the side but managed not to return it. He continued to stare straight ahead but took no notice of what he saw.

"What do you get?" he asked cautiously. It was rare for Remus to hear him like that. The always confident, always spiteful Sirius.

"You do *like* me, but just not like *that*. It's all right. I didn't expect it any other way."

Sirius's silence showed Remus that he had hit the mark. He felt sick to his stomach.

"It's not as simple as you make it out to be."

Remus snorted snidely, hating himself for it the next moment. "Then

how is it?"

Sirius struggled for words. "You know I'm not good at expressing that kind of stuff."

Remus had no sympathy for that. "Try."

You would have thought that Sirius had used the time yesterday to prepare his rebuff sensibly. But he was probably, as usual, just saying whatever popped into his head.

"I'm just not...I'm not..."

"Is 'gay' the word you're looking for?" asked Remus curtly, looking at Sirius for the first time to see his reaction. He looked at him in shock, the word alone seemed to throw him off.

"R...right," he muttered. Then, rushed, he added, "Don't get me wrong, Moony. If you are, that's fine with me, of course. It's just *me*...I'm not...I can't..."

Remus didn't know whether to be angry with him, or just feel sorry. Growing up in the Black family and only learning the word *gay* as a swear word apparently didn't shake off so easily. Walburga had done her job well.

"Like I said, I get it." He considered leaving it at that, but he couldn't help the next sentence. "Didn't feel like it yesterday, though. Quite the opposite, actually."

Sirius stiffened.

"I... I got carried away," he said quietly. "It was a mistake."

Mistake. Remus felt the next punch in his guts. Fuck, this was a nightmare.

"Ah, got it." He stubbed out his cigarette and half turned to go. He couldn't bear to be near Sirius for even a second longer. "If you're uncomfortable living with me now, just say so. Then I'll find something else."

Sirius looked at him as if he had slapped him in the face. "Don't say something like that! I would never want that."

"Okay," was all Remus said, and left Sirius standing there. Sirius called after him, but he ignored it. Half blind, he stumbled back to his room.

He just managed to close his door behind him before it got ugly.

***

After that, everything was different. To an outsider, the differences might not seem so great, but to Remus it was two different worlds.

The jokes and banter, once their main means of communication, had all but disappeared. They had given way to careful glances, small talk, and dry-as-dust anecdotes of their shifts at the Order. Remus hated it.

The kiss was forbidden territory; no one moved anywhere near it thematically. Even though Remus thought about it permanently, immersed himself in the surreal seconds, and felt constantly bad about it.

The days dragged by and Remus slowly got used to the change in mood. They met James and Lily, who immediately noticed that something was off, but did not ask about it. They fulfilled their duties in the Order, ran errands, had conversations with allies, and sat silently on the couch in the evenings.

Remus threw himself into his books, trying to distract himself from the fact that he was about to lose his best friend. And that it was all his fault.

He was almost looking forward to his first shift after the injury. Looked forward to being out of the apartment, not seeing Sirius and not having to feel his sidelong glances. This time he was in Diagon Alley, with Alice Longbottom, who was still slightly snuffy, but in as good a mood as ever.

"Are you all right?" she asked him worriedly as a greeting, because she could probably tell he was barely sleeping.

"Great," Remus replied dryly. "Shall we start?"

This shift didn't end in the hospital for Remus, thankfully, nor did the ones that followed. Sirius had been right, he really did get used to it.

It became like a job, a rather boring one at that. He got to know the

members of the Order better and many parts of the network that Dumbledore and Moody had built around it. Sometimes there were incidents, once Frank Longbottom and Gideon Prewett met another scout and got into a fight, but there were no more injuries. Voldemort and his followers kept surprisingly quiet.

It was dangerous, that silence. It made Remus lull himself into a false sense of security, and he was aware of that. But he would rather take that risk than spend another evening sitting on the couch next to Sirius, suffering in silence. He became more and more involved with the Order, spending hours with Moody, working extra shifts, and training in Defense Against the Dark Arts in his spare time.

And so he also filled in for Peter one night. At the Roberts house. Peter wasn't sick and didn't really have an excuse, but he had secretly told Remus at the last Order meeting that he was dreading the shift. It was infamous in the Order, not only because of the incident, but because everyone knew that a major attack was only a matter of time.

Remus felt sorry for Peter, who was still struggling with his insecurity, so together they lied to Doge that Peter was not fit for his shift. Peter was incredibly grateful to him and Remus had avoided another evening at home.

Casually, Remus dropped it at dinner just about an hour before the shift started. He and Sirius were eating casserole, hastily cobbled together by Remus and not particularly tasty.

"I'm about to take Peter's shift, by the way."

Sirius paused and looked at him in irritation. There were dark circles under his eyes. "Why is that?"

"Oh, Peter said he wasn't feeling so well. I offered it to him."

"But you were just last nig-"

"I don't mind," Remus interrupted him, continuing to eat as if that closed the subject. But Sirius's fork didn't start moving again.

"You shouldn't overdo it. When was the last time you had a decent night's sleep?"

"I sleep enough," Remus lied, looking stubbornly at his plate. Why couldn't Sirius just leave him alone?

"So...where are you assigned then?"

"Roberts." Remus sounded like he was talking about the weather, but he clenched his fist under the table.

The silence that followed the name was uncomfortable. Remus stared so intently at his plate that he wouldn't be surprised if it broke in half at any moment. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius put down his cutlery.

"Do you think...this is a good idea?"

"Why? It's just a shift like any other. Don't worry about it."

"It's not."

"Sirius," Remus said, a little more sharply than he intended. "It's my decision." First he ignored him for days, and then he was going to give him orders? It didn't work that way.

"Remus," Sirius said, and Remus flinched reliably, as he always did, when Sirius addressed him by his first name. Finally he got over himself and looked at Sirius, who was staring at him gravely, almost angrily. Remus suppressed an annoyed groan. He didn't have the nerve for this kind of conversation.

"What?" he retorted sharply anyway. "What's your problem?"

He saw anger flare in Sirius's eyes, but instead of letting it spill out unfiltered, as would have been typical for him, he closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

"Listen," he said pointedly calmly.

When he started a sentence like that, it was never a good sign.

"I think we need to talk about some things again."

"Is that so?" asked Remus further belligerently. What could he possibly mean by that? Everything was fucking perfect in *Maison Black*, after all.

"I've been... thinking," Sirius continued, seeming to choose his words carefully.

"Whoa, totally new," Remus continued to provoke, as if it was Sirius's sole fault that they were in this shitty situation. Sirius gave him a

bitter look and shook his head slowly, disappointment seeming to ooze from his every pore. Remus lowered his gaze.

"Stop it, I'm not going to argue with you right now."

Why not? Why are you suddenly the reasonable one of us?

He replied nothing, putting down his cutlery now, too. He had lost his appetite.

"I can't go on like this," Sirius said, and Remus couldn't stop the dull ache in his chest from flaring freshly, as if someone had plunged a knife into the poorly healed wound.

"What do you mean?" retorted Remus, choking. But he didn't even want to know the answer.

"This," he gestured back and forth between them, "is killing me."

"What, exactly?" Remus sounded like a whiny child to his own ears. "There's nothing between us."

"I know." Sirius looked at him, and his expression seemed tired and sad. "And I can't stand that. It's like we're strangers."

Remus's eyes began to burn and he tried to cover it up with anger. "You don't say! I wonder what caused that?" He slapped the table with the palm of his hand, not hard, but it helped him get a grip on himself again. He couldn't start crying in front of Sirius now.

"The thing that happened the other day," Sirius explained calmly, as if it wasn't already perfectly clear to Remus. "We should talk about it again."

Remus hated him. Hated that he was just so understanding, that he was the better one of them, that he brought out the ugliest side in Remus and was all the more perfect, all the more beautiful for it.

But actually, he loved Sirius. So much that it took his breath away. It choked him, made him stand up angrily from his chair.

"It's all been said, isn't it? You've made your point and I'm trying to deal with it. So please let me get my shit together in peace."

The flight instinct kicked in again and Remus had an overwhelming urge to leave the room. But this time Sirius didn't let him get that far. Remus just managed to make two steps, then he felt two arms wrap

around him from behind and a body press tightly against him. Remus froze.

"Don't run away now," Sirius's firm voice sounded in Remus's ear. Hectically, he freed himself from the embrace, turned and looked at Sirius in irritation. He was slightly blurry, because of the tears in Remus's eyes.

Nevertheless, he saw Sirius's eyes widen and a second later he hugged him again. Remus didn't return the hug.

"I'm sorry," Sirius whispered, his voice sounding choked. "I'm ... really sorry."

Remus wanted to push him away roughly, wanted to hurl savage insults at him, and most of all, he wanted to kiss him. In the end, he did none of that, he just let his arms drop.

"I'm the one who's sorry. It was me who ruined everything, Pads. None of this is your fault."

Sirius tore away from Remus and grabbed him tightly by the shoulders instead. His face was flushed, his eyes wide as if they seemed to want to tell him a thousand things at once.

"Stop saying that! Stop it!" he shouted, shaking Remus lightly.

This time it was Remus who remained calm. As if subconsciously they were both trying to keep their balance. He grabbed Sirius's forearms and disengaged them from his shoulders. "It's okay, really. You don't owe me anything."

Sirius glared at him, the desperation on his face literally screaming at Remus. "*Please*, Moony. Let's talk. I have a lot to say." He let go of Remus and instead tilted his head forward, clutching Remus's shirt with one hand.

Remus hesitated. For a long time. But then his hand carefully found its way to Sirius's back. He shivered.

"Okay," he said, trying not to sound too harsh. "When I get back, we'll talk."

"Thank you," Sirius breathed, making no move to back away. Remus let him; he wouldn't have been able to do anything else.

But eventually he had to end their amicable silence. "I have to go."

Sirius nodded and broke away from Remus. His eyes were red. "Please take care of yourself."

Remus nodded with a wooden expression. "Sure."

Sirius tried a small smile. "And try not to die."

That even elicited a small, pathetic smirk from him. "Got it."

He went into the hallway, bracing himself for the freezing cold. His thoughts were on Sirius, as always. He wondered what Sirius was dying to talk to him about that he didn't already know anyway.

When he finished wrapping up, he waved goodbye to Sirius, who was still standing where Remus had left him. "See you."

"See you," Sirius said, and Remus couldn't quite read his expression. Still, as Remus pulled the door closed behind him, shivering in the cold wind, a tiny smile crept onto his lips. It was a telltale hope that clawed readily into his guts, wanting to read more into Sirius's words than was healthy for him.

But when did Remus's heart ever do what it was supposed to?

***

"What's the matter, Lupin? You seem distracted," Moody grumbled, giving him a critical sideways glance.

"No, I'm fine," Remus replied hastily, trying to stay focused. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to come out with the truth about the shift so close to it after all.

"Very well, I need you alert today. I'm expecting new scouts tonight. We need to scare them off as soon as possible so they can't get any results."

"Understood," Remus said curtly. The thought of facing a Death Eater again, after the way the last encounter had ended, made him feel uneasy, and he was annoyed that he hadn't had time to buy more cigarettes.

As it turned out, Moody was not as restless as Sturgis. They made considerably fewer rounds and were more static in their alarm post, from which they could see the entire open space behind the Roberts house.

The night was clear, and the rising crescent moon provided enough light to avoid misunderstandings. Because if there was one thing Remus had learned in the last few night shifts, it was that darkness could play tricks on you. If you looked at a certain spot long enough, something moved almost automatically. Ninety-nine percent of the time it was just his imagination, but it didn't help to calm his mind.

It didn't do his boredom much good, though, just sitting in his post and staring at the field for hours. It was a little warmer than the nights before, and Moody was not at all talkative. And so it happened that Remus kept nodding off briefly from halfway through his shift.

"Hey!" he was rudely accosted at one point, and felt Moody's wand dig into his shoulder. He startled and saw Moody's angry look. "What are you doing? Aren't you taking this seriously?"

"Sorry" Remus rose hastily, trying to get his blood flow going again. "Won't happen again." This was awkward. He could get away with it with the others in the Order, but not in front of Moody.

The older wizard looked at him seething for another moment before grumbling, "I should hope so." Just as Moody turned back to stare angrily at the field, Remus heard something. It was like a little hiss, as if someone hadn't screwed the top of a soda bottle on properly. At first Remus wanted to dismiss it as imagination, but then it grew stronger. He stepped up to Moody. "Do you hear that?"

Moody turned his face toward him, but in the next moment Remus only saw his eyes roll back as he collapsed next to him.

"Moody!" he shouted in shock, trying to cushion his fall, but it had come so suddenly that he didn't react in time. Completely overwhelmed, he stared at the motionless body on the ground in front of him.

"CRUCIO!" someone screamed behind them, disturbingly close, and for a second everything went white with pain. A bestial howl escaped Remus's throat and he slumped to the ground. Twitching wildly, he lay there, feeling as if he was about to become a werewolf.

"Stop it, Rabastan. He's down."

The pain stopped with a thud, but his body groaned after. A voice in his head screamed for him to reach for his wand, to fight back. But none of his limbs would obey him.

"He sure doesn't look like what was described," said a male voice, the same one that had shouted the torture curse. "Thought we were looking for short, fat one."

Brief silence, Remus managed to turn his head and saw a tall figure in a black cloak lean down to him. His face was obscured by a white mask.

"You're right. No idea who that's supposed to be." The second voice sounded brighter, younger.

"What do we do now?"

Remus felt himself slowly coming back to his senses. His wand had fallen from his hand, but it couldn't be far. If only he could keep his hand unnoticeable....

"I say we take him anyway. In the end, it doesn't matter who it is. He'll do it, too."

The other seemed unconvinced.

"The Dark Lord explicitly asked for Pettigrew. He said he was the weak spot."

"Shut the fuck up! Do you want to tell him everything?"

"Calm down."

Remus inhaled sharply as he felt his wand. But just as he was about to grab it, someone stomped on his hand with full force. A loud crack was heard and Remus howled in pain.

"Don't you dare, you rat," one of the Death Eaters hissed close to his face and he felt the wand being snatched from his destroyed hand.

"Evan, take him with you. I'll take care of the Auror in the meantime."

"Make it quick. That guy is not to be underestimated."

"Yeah yeah," the Death Eater muttered, turning away from Remus. "I'll be right behind you."

The one named Evan leaned down to Remus, he could feel his grin even through his mask. "Sleep tight then, little rat."

The tip of his wand appeared in front of Remus's face. A bright light, then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: "The Chain" by Fleetwood Mac

It’s getting serious! I’m scared :')

See ya!

Chapter 5: The Last Song

Chapter Notes

CWs: Physical/Emotional Torture, Brainwashing, Cruelty, Violence, Angst, Hurt, (verbally expressed) Death Wish

The third scene of this chapter covers dark themes. Please read the CWs carefully and be kind to yourselves! If you want to skip this this part altogether, you can read up to the second '***' and then go to the end notes where I'll give you a short summary of what happens!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything will be alright

People are bad and the world is fucked up […]

But everything will be alright

Your life is in shambles and the house is on fire

But it will be alright

Doesn't feel like it, but everything will be alright

Regulus Black was the perfect spectator. Not very reactive, admittedly, nor very enthusiastic. But you could throw him into any situation, present any absurdity, however startling, and he would take note of it motionless, perhaps even mildly disinterested. He was unflappable, just as it suited the heir to the Noble and most Ancient House of Black.

Of course, it was all a facade, all a lie. But in this family, nothing else had ever mattered anyway.

It took Regulus a moment to realize who Evan Rosier had just dragged into the meeting room of 12 Grimmauld Place. But even when he finally did, he did not bat an eye.

"Can you explain this to me?" hissed Bellatrix at Evan, pointing at the motionless Remus on the floor. Evan had pulled off his hood and was holding his mask, gesturing wildly.

"This is not our fault! The guy was with Moody instead of Pettigrew!" As Evan spoke, Bellatrix leaned down to Remus, frowning, and examined his pale face. Regulus knew it was only a matter of seconds before she recognized him from old school days.

"I thought that maybe he could do the job too..."

There it was. Regulus saw the realization in her eyes. Bellatrix bared her teeth, straightened up in a flash, and harshly cut Evan off. "That's Remus Lupin, you bloody idiot!"

Her voice cracked and she pointed her index finger at Remus as if she were going to stab him with it. "The *werewolf*! Best friend of the blood traitor Potter!" She didn't take Sirius's name in her mouth; no one had for a long time. In this house, it was as if he had never existed.

Evan didn't seem to understand. "What's so bad about that? Pettigrew is also..."

She seemed on the verge of shaking him. "In your six years at Hogwarts, has there been a single second you weren't high?"

A fair question, Regulus couldn't recall one offhand.

"That would explain why you don't know this worthless half-breed." She lowered her arm and looked contemptuously at Remus. "He'll never work for us, no way."

Evan shrugged. "Then we'll just kill him."

Regulus clenched his fists behind his back.

Bellatrix gave him a probing look. "I'll talk to the Dark Lord first. Perhaps he can be useful to us in some other way."

"As you wish." He seemed reluctant to argue with her further. "Do you want me to lock him in the basement in the meantime?"

"Do that." Bellatrix looked thoughtful, a rare sight. Her gaze wandered over Remus, as if weighing something. Regulus didn't like that at all.

Suddenly, there was loud noise coming from the hallway. A moment later, the door was pushed open and a battered-looking Rabastan

Lestrange stumbled into the room. He was bleeding from the head and limping slightly. When he caught sight of Bellatrix, he paused.

"Moody has esca..."

Evan responded before Bellatrix could. "Are you fucking serious?" He had already half-raised Remus, but angrily let go of him again. "He was lying defenseless in front of us! All you had to do was kill him! How can you screw that up?"

Bellatrix's gaze switched back and forth between the two of them, and her expression turned from irritated to enraged.

But Rabastan preempted her explosion. "I wanted too, really. I wasn't messing around, I promise. Was halfway through casting the curse when he suddenly jumped up and threw spell after spell at me. I managed to hurt him, but my death curses missed him. And then he was gone."

Bellatrix's voice was an octave higher when she spoke. "You two are the most worthless pieces of shit I have ever seen. I'm going to report this to the lord. He will not be pleased."

"Great, way to go, Rabastan!" scolded Evan, shaking his head in anger. "I'm never trusting you with anything again..."

Rabastan wasn't the brightest, but you could tell he was aware of the magnitude of his failure this time. One of the most powerful members of the order had been handed to them on a silver platter and he had let him slip away.

"I'm really sorry," he mumbled, helping Evan pick Remus up off the floor.

"Just shut your mouth and help me get him to the basement," Evan raged on, and Rabastan obeyed. They dragged Remus out of the room and after the door slammed shut behind them, silence fell. Bellatrix looked furious, her fists clenched and she stared at the spot where Remus had lain. Then, as if all at once she remembered that Regulus also still existed, she raised her head and looked at him with her probing gaze.

"The Dark Lord will be arriving here shortly. I expect you to join the meeting."

Regulus tilted his head. "I would be honored."

She glanced at him critically, and for a moment it looked as if she was about to say something, but she didn't. Shaking her head, she left the room, one more time the heavy door slammed shut and Regulus was finally alone.

He had learned never to drop his mask in this house, even when he was alone. But it was still easier, he could lower his head, drop his shoulders.

Remus Lupin had fallen into their net. Regulus had witnessed several prisoners of this kind. Their fates were enough to know with absolute certainty that he was doomed.

***

Of course, Regulus would never admit it to anyone, but he was afraid of Voldemort. He was fucking terrified of him, of his black, piercing eyes, of the aura of cruelty that surrounded him and that he handed out as lightly as if it were candy. Though Regulus was a master in hiding his thoughts and emotions, the Dark Lord pushed him to his limits every time.

They sat across from each other at the big table, Voldemort on one side and - at a proper distance - Regulus and his cousin.

Voldemort was cloaked in dark robes. His pale face in stark contrast to his full, dark hair. He looked gaunter and greyer than the months before, but he was still an impressive figure. Regulus occasionally forced himself to lift his eyes from the tabletop and look at him.

Beside him, he could feel Bellatrix' tension. However, it was not with fear and loathing, as with Regulus, but with excitement, with eagerness, with awe. It would not be long before Bellatrix would kiss his feet in greeting.

Voldemort sat elegantly on the chair, one hand resting on the armrest, his wand placed casually on the table but immediately at hand. He had put on his haughty smile and made a welcoming gesture.

"I am informed that you have some things you wish to discuss?"

Bellatrix eagerly took the floor. "Yes, my lord. Some ... unpleasant

things have arisen."

Voldemort's smile froze instantly. "In what way?"

Bellatrix laughed uncertainly. "Your order to take Peter Pettigrew into custody has failed."

Hardness entered his features, frighteningly effortless. "Meaning?"

"Pettigrew was not at the Roberts' house as suspected. Instead, Rosier and Rabastan have captured Remus Lupin."

Voldemort's eyes widened. Regulus swallowed. Bellatrix's voice trembled slightly as she continued. "Nor did they succeed in taking out Alastor Moody."

Regulus almost feared that Voldemort would freak out and shoot around with the Cruciatus Curse, but he went completely silent, just as bad a sign. Regulus could feel it boiling inside him across the table.

"I see," was all he said. Bellatrix quivered beside him.

"And the half-breed is in the dungeon now?"

"Yes, he should be coming to soon."

Voldemort was silent, placing his fingers playfully over the grip of his wand. Regulus followed his movements as if hypnotized.

"It disappoints me that my order was not carried out", he said slowly.

"I assure you that they will willingly accept any punishment. I can gladly give you a hand with that," Bellatrix readily requested.

"Hmm, yes, they must be punished," Voldemort said as he continued to stroke his wand.

"And as for the half-breed, I can dispose of it quickly if it is a nuisance to you. We will find another way to get to Pettigrew."

"No," Voldemort said simply, and the murderousness vanished from his gaze. "The werewolf could be an opportunity. An unexpected one."

He lifted his gaze and fixed Regulus. He looked back mildly interested, but it took all the willpower he had.

"You ought to know him. What can you tell me about him?"

Regulus chose his words carefully, "He's very close with James Potter and Sirius Black." Bellatrix winced at the mention of his brother. "Unlike Pettigrew, he wasn't a follower, he's part of the inner circle. He's...very strong-willed. And probably very convinced of the Order."

Bellatrix sighed theatrically. "So he's worthless as a spy for us and ..."

Voldemort raised a hand and Bellatrix instantly fell silent.

"So you don't think I could convince him?"

Regulus shrugged. "I don't know. Everyone reacts differently to torture, I guess."

"Indeed." Voldemort mused. "It would be worth a try. He's just a dirty werewolf, but his position in the Order is tempting. Perhaps he will come to his senses after all."

Regulus felt tension rising inside him, but he didn't let any of it enter his mind, not for a second. Thoughts were his enemy, evil, dangerous.

A cruel smile stole onto Voldemort's lips. "That reminds me, I just had an exchange with Igor Karkaroff recently, he knows a new, very promising method. It could prove very useful in this case."

"What method would that be?" asked Bellatrix cautiously, the question burning under Regulus's fingernails as well.

Voldemort inclined his head. "Let's call it, '*advanced persuasion*.' Almost impossible to refuse."

A shiver ran down Regulus's spine.

"That sounds great, my lord. I'm at your service if you need assistance," Bellatrix said eagerly.

"I certainly could in this case. It's a longer process, I'm afraid."

Regulus wanted to disappear, far away, to a deserted island. But he was forced to remain motionless in the chair. Even as Voldemort looked at him again and asked in a smooth voice, "Will you support me, Regulus Black?"

He looked the Dark Lord firmly in the eye. "I would be honored."

***

There were several reasons why Regulus had rather wanted to see Peter Pettigrew tied to that chair in front of him. It wasn't that he wished this situation on him, he didn't wish that on anyone. But he knew Peter from school days, knew that he loved his friends, but that this love was not strong enough to die for them.

He would press around, maybe hold out for a few minutes of torture. But then he would buckle. He would start working for Voldemort, he would not suffer greatly, he would not die. And Regulus wouldn't have to witness any of this.

But Remus Lupin was not like that. Regulus had had little contact with him at Hogwarts either, had never done more than watch him and his stupid brother from the distance.

But he had always known that Remus was special. He saw it in his eyes, in the way he held his head, in the way he squared his shoulders when he had to be brave. He was a good man. And he would die for his friends without hesitation. That fool.

He was scared, you could see it in his face. He hadn't been awake long, his eyes small and red, but his body was tense, his jaw clenched tight, his uninjured hand clenched into a fist under his restraints.

His gaze wandered back and forth between Bellatrix and Regulus, filled with hatred. Regulus had trouble holding his gaze. Bellatrix was enjoying every second of it.

"Good morning, sweetie, did you sleep well?" she crooned, pacing the room like a cat circling a helpless mouse.

Remus wasn't gagged, but he didn't answer, only yanked at the bonds that held him in place. Bellatrix stopped in front of him and leaned forward, smiling.

"You may be wondering why you're here, alive and well, and not dead like that bastard Moody."

The lie was effective. Remus snapped his eyes open in shock, curled his fingers into the chair, shook his head. "No... no way."

"Yes, and I've been told it was only that easy because he was

distracted." She moved even closer to him and whispered, "Because he had to take care of you."

"That's not true..." Horror filled Remus's eyes and Regulus felt sorry for him.

If you're already feeling pity, you're not going to make it through the next few hours, a sneering voice inside him mocked. And it was right.

"I'm afraid so, sweetie. It's all your fault. What's the Order going to do without him now?"

"Stop!"

"But we shouldn't even bother with that anyway." She straightened, turned away, and raised her chin. "The Dark Lord has chosen you, half-breed. A great honor."

Remus stared at the back of Bellatrix's head, "For what?"

Bellatrix turned back to him with a swing. "A really great honor. He wants you to join us."

Remus let out a loud, joyless laugh that echoed off the bare walls. "Good joke. What does he really want?"

She smiled fondly as she raised her wand. "Crucio," she sighed, and Remus let out a scream that froze the blood in Regulus's veins. He had heard many such screams before. But it was always different when it was someone you knew.

Bellatrix let him writhe for a good five seconds before she released the curse.

"A little taste," she said as Remus slumped in his chair, "of what's to come if you keep being so bold."

Remus was breathing heavily, teeth bared, but the hateful look he gave Bellatrix had strength. At least he was smart enough not to say anything in response.

"Well, I'll make the offer again," she said calmly. "And I would advise you to listen carefully." She paused for a moment and looked at Remus waitingly, but he said nothing, just killed her with glances. She laughed.

"There you go." She tossed her frizzy hair behind her shoulder. "The

Dark Lord is actually interested in working with you. He's well aware of your advantageous situation in Dumbledore's Traitor Army, and very interested in information on inner processes, firsthand, so to speak."

Remus didn't laugh, this time. With a scowl, he leaned forward as far as his restraints would allow and glared at Bellatrix. "No."

She wasn't torturing him this time, just looking at him like a particularly obtuse child.

"Let me put it another way: Your cooperation could be to the benefit of both sides. The Dark Lord would be one step ahead of Dumbledore, and you would leave this room with your sanity intact."

When Remus heard that, he froze. As if only now did he truly realize the situation he was in. What his only two options were.

Please, you idiot, just say yes, just say yes, we'll figure something out.

But he was a bloody Gryffindor. Even when he realized what the price was, what the consequences were for his pride, he just shook his head somberly. "Never."

Bellatrix looked happy. "Oh, I was almost hoping you'd say that. I've been looking forward to this for hours."

***

Bellatrix was insane. That had been clear to Regulus for a long time, but in moments like these her madness flared up especially strongly, burning down everything around her. To be helplessly at her mercy had to be one of the worst possible fates.

She tortured Remus enthusiastically. Held her wand out to him like a leash, at the end of which came only anguish, only terrible, incomparable, indescribable agony.

Regulus knew the pain. Sometimes, at night, he would still feel it, as if his mother were standing over him again, doing what she had always done best.

Remus was brave. He screamed, he squirmed, he stomped, he cursed, but he did not give in. You could tell he was used to pain. Regulus was beginning to understand why Sirius thought so much of him.

After more than an hour, Bellatrix finally lowered her wand in boredom and sighed.

"Sure you won't change your mind? You could go very far under the Dark Lord."

"I'd rather die," he voiced what had long been clear to Regulus. Bellatrix nodded almost indulgently. "That, sweetie, we will not grant you. You still have a long journey ahead of you. And I assure you, there will be nothing left of you in the end."

Regulus was glad Bellatrix was covering Remus's face as she turned to face him. "So, little cousin, it's your turn. Let's see what you've got. Prove to me that you've earned your place among the Death Eaters."

Regulus looked at her motionless, but his body stiffened. Seemingly confident, he nodded and stepped forward. Pushing himself into Remus's field of vision, he looked into his red, sweaty face and bloodshot eyes. He looked terrible. His gaze burned like fire.

"How are you're not ashamed of yourself?" Remus rumbled, his voice hoarse from screaming. "For letting all this happen. How can you do this to Sirius-"

"Don't say that name!" shouted Regulus at him, surprised himself by the harshness of his reaction. If there was anything he wanted less now than to torture Remus, it was to think of his brother in the process.

Remus fell silent for a second, his gaze no less hateful. Then he snorted snidely. "He would be so disappointed. He had so much hope in you...that you wouldn't turn out like the rest of those despicable..."

Regulus slapped him in the face. That seemed to upset Remus more than the prospect of further torture.

Regulus was at least as surprised as him, but his anger was even stronger. "Shut your fucking mouth, werewolf! You don't understand anything. You're just my brother's lapdog anyway. Too worthless to be anything more."

"Do it, Regulus," Bellatrix whispered behind him like a dark shadow. "Show him how little he's worth."

Remus looked at him with deep contempt, almost challenging. Regulus's body played along. Played the role everyone attributed to him. That of the bitter, left-behind boy who loved the dark forces more than his brother and who tortured someone because he was told to.

But his heart didn't. It never did. It was the reason he woke up every night drenched in sweat, always thinking about what he had done. That always grew big when Regulus allowed himself to think about smudged glasses and a mischievous smile. It would eventually be his downfall.

He raised his wand menacingly and spat "Crucio!" at Remus. Remus closed his eyes, his shoulders pulling up as he expected the pain. But it didn't come.

"Crucio!" shouted Regulus again, but again nothing happened. Remus opened his eyes again and gave Regulus a strange look that he didn't know how to interpret. At the same moment he was roughly grabbed by the shoulder by Bellatrix and pulled backwards.

"You useless idiot. You miserable failure!" she hissed, shoving him against the nearest wall. "I'm going to tell Walburga about this!"

Regulus tried not to show the pain that raced down his shoulders as he hit the cold stone.

"I have no control over this."

"Liar!" hissed Bellatrix, and Regulus wondered if she was going to punish him now. But she just shook her head dismissively and turned back to Remus, who had become very quiet.

"I'll show you how to do it properly. Watch it very carefully."

And she did. And if Remus had remained admirably steadfast in the first round, now you could tell he was exhausted. And that was all Bellatrix was waiting for. She was a master of torture, knew every loophole, every stage of suffering. She drilled into all the seams, all the grooves of the mind and tore them apart. Remus didn't stand a chance.

It went on for hours. Piece by piece, she broke him apart. The sound of his uncontrolled screams started to burn into Regulus's mind, would probably never leave him again. Feeling nauseous, he closed his eyes.

"I don't feel well, can I please go?" asked Regulus at some point over Remus's screams when he couldn't take it anymore.

Bellatrix just looked at him like he was a piece of dirt stuck to the bottom of her shoe. "You're not going anywhere. You're staying here until someone tells you otherwise. If you're not going to contribute, at least you're going to watch it until you learn."

And she kept going. And eventually the curse alone wasn't enough for her. She started punching him, hurling the chair against the wall with a curse until it broke, kicking Remus as he lay on the floor. Regulus turned away.

Then at some point, an eternity later, she stopped. Remus lay on his back, eyes fixed on the ceiling, his whole body shaking. Tears streamed down the sides of his face, dripping onto the floor and into his light brown hair.

"Good," Bellatrix said curtly. "I think he's ready. I'll get the Dark Lord now, he'll finish it." She gave Regulus a snide look. "You make sure he doesn't do anything stupid. I hope you can handle that at least."

"Yes," Regulus said, trying to cling to the last remnants of his mask. His nerves were raw.

With a quiet "Tss," she left him standing and walked out of the room. Regulus looked to the motionless Remus, not knowing what to say or do.

"Please" Remus breathed, so softly he could barely hear it. "*Kill me*." Horror filled Regulus at the sound of the words. Inevitably, he moved closer, kneeling beside him, even though he knew it was a mistake.

"No," he replied, looking into Remus's bloodshot eyes, which turned from the ceiling to him at his answer.

"Please," he pleaded, putting all the strength he had into those words. "I don't want this."

"I can't. They'll hurt me if I do." Regulus hated how pathetic, how frightened his own voice sounded. He couldn't hide it anymore.

Remus turned his gaze back to the ceiling, tears dripping steadily from his face.

"I can feel it already," he whispered. "I'm losing myself."

Regulus pressed his lips together, feeling the urge to cover his ears.

Remus, however, did not stop tormenting him. He contorted his face, trembled, seemed to fight invisible shadows. When he relaxed again, he smiled sadly. Maybe he was trying to think of something good, if that was even possible.

"I love him," he whispered, sounding gentle despite his strained voice. "I can't forget that."

Regulus followed his overwhelming impulse, grasping Remus's trembling hand. He knew who Remus was talking about, had long suspected it. Remus had always worn his heart on his sleeve, it had been hard to miss.

He was a good man, better than any single one here in this house. Regulus's finger began to tremble as he realized all at once that this was the last time he would ever see him. This was it. This was the end of Remus Lupin.

"I'll remember for you."

It was pathetic, Regulus knew that. He felt a burning in his eyes, a lump in his throat. Sirius's face flashed in his mind and he felt nauseous.

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for it to come to this.

Remus squeezed his hand back, shaking under another silent sob.

"*Thank you*," he breathed. As if Regulus had done something noble, as if he deserved it. As if he hadn't just muttered empty words. In a few moments, Voldemort would come and he would kill Remus, at least the part of him he didn't want. And Regulus would stand on the sidelines and watch. Because that's what he always did, because that's what he did best.

All too soon, he heard footsteps approaching. He backed away from Remus, they exchanged one last look, and Regulus tried to memorize

every detail of him, every inch and everything in his eyes, that made him human. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve before the door slid open and cold filled the room.

Voldemort almost floated into the room, his gaze hard. Behind him, Bellatrix followed like a puppy.

"Regulus," Voldemort said sternly. "Go wait outside. We need to talk at length in a moment."

So Bellatrix had ratted him out directly, typical of her. Regulus didn't dare object, with a curt nod he strode towards the door.

"But don't worry. It won't take too much longer," Voldemort added, slowly.

Regulus closed the door behind him and immediately had to throw up noisily in the dark hallway. It had been brewing inside him for hours, but Voldemort's last comment had been too much. Regulus felt like he was trapped in his own hell.

The worst part was that he could hear it. The all-too-familiar screams, his cousin's manic laughter. It was unbearable.

And then, eventually, everything went silent. It felt final, drilling into Regulus's ears, piercing his heart.

He sank to his knees.

It was over.

Chapter End Notes

> Songlyrics: 'Der letzte Song (Alles wird gut) / The Last Song (Everything Will Be Alright)' by Kummer feat. Fred Rabe (simutaneously a very dark and very hopeful song! Quite fitting for the current state of this fic...)

> [Scene-Summary:
> Bellatrix begins to torture Remus using the Cruciatus curse. Regulus is present. When she orders Regulus to torture Remus as well, he fails, which infuriates Bellatrix and causes her to threaten him with consequences. In the end, when Remus is barely sane,

Voldemort is brought in and Regulus is sent out. Regulus doesn't see what happens to Remus in his last minutes. But he knows anyway.]

That was really sad to write...
I think at this point I should point out that I intend for this fic to have a happy ending! :P It will get better (eventually) I promise.

Let's see how all of that is gonna turn out. Next chapter will be Sirius' PoV!

See ya. :(

Chapter 6: Suspicious Minds

Chapter Summary

Oh, let our love survive.

Chapter Notes

CW: Injury

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We're caught in a trap, I can't walk out

Because I love you too much, baby

The Patronus came in the middle of the night. Sirius was a sound sleeper, but the aura the Lynx exuded was so strong that it jolted him right out of his confusing dreams. He knew instantly that something terrible must have happened.

"Attack at Roberts house. Moody injured in hospital. Lupin missing. Further situation unclear. 10 a.m. crisis meeting at the Potters'."

Lupin missing. Sirius sat upright in bed, his fingers clawing into the covers. The Patronus repeated his words once, Doge's voice sounding as monotone as ever, as if he was talking about another shift change. Then the lynx dissolved, plunging the room back into darkness.

Lupin missing. A jolt went through Sirius's body, he threw the covers aside, jumped up. He grabbed his clothes from yesterday, lying carelessly on the floor, and hastily slipped into them. Without looking in the mirror, he ran out of the room, down the stairs and into the hallway. The whole flat was eerily quiet.

Lupin Missing. There was a yawning emptiness in his mind, the echo of the two words obliterating everything else. Breathing heavily, he pulled on his boots and jacket, just remembering his keys before he ran out the door and disapparated.

There was only one place he could go now, where he absolutely had to go. Just the thought of being alone now ate him up from the inside. He apparated to the front of the unassuming little flat, ran through the

front yard to the front door, rang the bell.

It took only a few seconds before James opened the door. Wide awake, his face pale. "We just got the..."

Sirius didn't let him finish. "James, he's ..." He couldn't say it, no way. James understood. He nodded sorrowfully, hugged him wordlessly, and let him in. Inside, Sirius caught sight of Lily, who had just pulled on a sweater and was smoothing down her hair. Her face was also dripping with worry, her eyes wide, her eyebrows drawn together.

"Sirius," she said meaningfully, taking a few steps towards him.

"Hey," was all he replied, and after seeing his face up close, she hugged him too.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered, stroking his back. Sirius returned the hug, letting himself fall for a moment.

"What if he...?"

"Don't think about that now. It will all clear up, for sure. It's Remus, what ever got him down?"

Sirius was grateful for her optimism, but he didn't share it.

"We ... we had a fight," he whispered. "Before he left."

Lily tightened her embrace.

"I really wanted to tell him something. But I didn't." Sirius released one hand from Lily's back and pressed it to his forehead. "Why didn't I?"

"Don't torture yourself," Lily murmured, far too understanding, far too empathetic. Didn't she understand what that meant? What a mistake Sirius had made?

He heard James's voice close to him, felt another pair of hands on his back. "Stay here for now, it's almost morning. We'll wait until the meeting, we'll find out what happened then at the latest."

Sirius loosened his embrace, looking at both of them, upset. "It's still hours until then! By then, who knows what could have happened to him! We can't just wait it out!"

James raised his hands placatingly. "Where would we even start,

Pads? There's no sign of him at the Roberts'. He could be anywhere. We'll have to wait to see what Moody has to say."

"It would be too dangerous to just storm out now," Lily encouraged him.

Sirius searched for counterarguments in his head, anything to express his drive, his agitation. He began pacing the room, ruffling his hair.

"But what else are we going to do? I ... I can't just stay here and wait."

How was he going to get through the next few hours without going insane?

James looked similarly miserable as Sirius felt.

"I know," he said. "I know. It sucks. But you need to keep a clear head right now. What if Doge and the others really do have a lead? We're no help there if we're nervous wrecks."

"I will be either way", Sirius scoffed sadly.

"I know. Maybe it would help if you sat down first?" he asked cautiously, as if Sirius were a mad animal, pointing to the dark couch next to him.

Sirius's gaze followed his finger, hesitating, but eventually shaking his head.

"I have to get back to the flat. What if he does come back? Maybe he's hurt or needs my help." He stared at them both, knowing he looked like a mess. His fingers were shaking, so he clawed them into his jeans. His eyes burned, so he closed them.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Then we'll come with you." Sirius nodded, waiting stiffly until the two of them had gathered their things and walked him outside. James had placed a hand reassuringly on his shoulder. But it didn't help. Nothing could. Nothing except Moony. He just wanted him back.

***

To say that the next few hours went by slowly was a massive

understatement. James and Lily did their best: they distracted him, discussed various scenarios of the incident with him, even though they probably were equally as upset by it. Still, it didn't help Sirius.

When they finally stepped out of the green fire in the morning and stood in Fleamont and Euphemia Potter's living room, Sirius was a shadow of himself. It took him a moment to realize the turmoil that was around them. The living room was packed, almost all the Order members were already there, talking wildly. Sirius could only pick up a few scraps of words.

"The next attack may...", "Did Moody see who...", "Voldemort's new strategy..."

He shook his head, trying to tune out the chatter. He'd spent enough of the last few hours on what-ifs, he needed clarity now. James grabbed his arm and Sirius willingly let him lead him through the crowd. There was still no sign of Moody.

A little later they were standing in front of Euphemia, who was leaning in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, deep worry lines on her otherwise friendly face. When she saw Lily, James, and Sirius, she took all three of them into a big hug.

"I'm sorry," she said, seemingly not wanting to let them go. When she finally did though she put a hand on Lily's and Sirius's shoulder and looked at all three of them one by one. "We'll get through this."

"Thank you," Lily said vicariously. They were the same empty phrases Sirius had been hearing for hours, but Euphemia managed to ease his anxiety even with them, at least for a short time.

However, when he noticed Frank and Alice behind him, felt their pitying looks on him, and heard "how terrible" the situation was, that brief moment had passed. He had no desire to speak to them, the only one he wanted to see now was Moody. A phrase he would never have heard himself say 24 hours ago.

Moody came through the fireplace 20 minutes later, only seconds after Daedalus Diggel, and heavily bent over his walking stick. Diggel walked close beside him, eager to support him in case he lost his balance, but Moody whipped his body recklessly forward, hobbled to the large table, and settled heavily on a chair at the head end.

The rest of the Order followed in a flash, stopped talking, and took seats at the table, wrapped in tense silence. Sirius tried with all his might to ignore the empty seat next to him and stared at Moody, whose sleepless night was most apparent of all those present.

He had a gray face, freshly healed, reddened cuts on his cheeks and forehead, and unkempt, partly sticky hair. His overly obvious limp indicated more wounds, all more poorly healed in the few hours in the hospital. But Moody probably would have cursed every single doctor at St. Mungo's if they had continued to force him to stay there. A quality Sirius appreciated in him.

Moody, as usual, didn't beat around the bush. "Seems like you all got Elphias's Patronus." Sirius glanced briefly at the short wizard, who was taking notes and working his quill as usual.

"I'm going to explain to you in detail what happened," he interrupted himself with a loud cough. "After that, we'll talk about what we're going to do about it."

Sirius leaned forward tensely, as if that might help him pick up more information. Moody coughed again and cleared his throat noisily, then finally recounted:

"Presumably two Death Eaters have been lurking in wait for Lupin and me, possibly for quite some time, from a safe distance. At about 2 a.m. Lupin and I were distracted for a moment and they took the opportunity. Before I could do anything I was hit by a curse and briefly lost consciousness. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes. Woke up again just as one of the Death Eaters was about to finish me off. Got him under control, the bungler. But there was no sign of Lupin."

"And what does that mean?" muttered Doge, and Sirius was glad of it.

Moody looked at him seriously. "Good question. I had Podmore and Diggel search every inch around the house again as soon as they could...but it's like Lupin fell off the face of the earth."

Sirius clenched his fists.

"I'm sure it was two Death Eaters at first, though. When I came to, I heard them talking. But then one must have disappeared, probably with Lupin."

"That means..." began Doge, and was already confirmed by a grim nod

from Moody. "He's been kidnapped."

It had been obvious. From the beginning. But the implications behind it were killing Sirius. He was a Black, he knew the methods. He knew his cousin, knew this entire family. If Remus was their prisoner, then....

He felt more pitying sidelong glances on him than he could take. He clenched his fists tighter, felt his fingernails digging into his palms. He looked up, piercing the uncomfortable silence.

"So they're torturing him," he said matter-of-factly, and Moody looked at him.

"Probably. Either they're trying to get information out of him, or we're going to start getting demands for his release soon enough."

Sirius laughed bitterly. "As if the bloody Death Eaters would be interested in such a deal. Voldemort takes what he wants, and if he doesn't get it, he gets rid of him."

The last sentence was poison on his tongue. His mind tortured him with images: Remus writhing in agony, standing firm as always, ultimately brought down by green light. Maybe it was already too late, maybe....

James nudged him gently and pulled him out of his vicious mental circle. Sirius gave him a hurried look, which was returned with concern.

"Probably," Moody said thoughtfully of his assessment. "He probably wants to get as much information about Dumbledore out of him as possible."

Where was Dumbledore, anyway? Sitting in his secure castle, never showing his face to the common folk. Not even when one of his group was captured. Sirius was angry at him, angry at everyone who had allowed this to happen.

"That's the starting position we have. Now we have to figure out how to go on. Lupin is in captivity and there is a chance they can get dangerous information out of him through torture or legilimency. We need to track him down as soon as possible and make a plan to rescue him."

Sirius barely let him finish. "He's probably at Grimmauld Place. They

have extra dungeons there for that sort of thing." The calm in his voice was just a facade. "It's a hub for Death Eaters, they've done... similar things there before."

Moody nodded thoughtfully. "I've thought of that, too. But the house will be well guarded and protected. We'll have to scout first to see if there are any loopholes."

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked Sirius, his impatience growing by the second.

"Take it easy," Moody said, but it had the opposite effect. Sirius felt the heat rush to his face.

"It won't get us anywhere now if we rush headlong into disaster," the Auror continued, in his condescending tone. Sirius bit his tongue.

"I volunteer to be a scout," Frank spoke up, followed by many similar voices, which Moody noted with a grateful nod.

Sirius shook his head, raising his voice above the others. "I definitely need to be there."

Moody's head paused in its motion, his eyes narrowing. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

Sirius's head jerked forward, uncomprehending. "Excuse me? I know the most about the house."

"We'd appreciate your advice and tips. But there's too much risk of the operation going wrong with someone this *emotionally* involved in it."

Sirius knocked over his chair as he rose in a rage and slammed his hands on the table. The noise echoed uncomfortably loud in his ears.

"What the hell are you talking about?", he hissed at the Auror.

He felt James's hand on his arm, but he shook it off fiercely. "You want me to just sit around while you save him? He's my best friend."

Moody looked completely unimpressed. "And I preach every week that you all need to keep your personal feelings under control. We have a job to do, and that always comes first."

Sirius shook his head uncomprehendingly, a hysterical laugh hanging in his throat. "I insist on being there for the scouting and the rescue."

"And I insist you finally learn your place. Sit down, Black."

The name sounded like an insult to Sirius's ears. Moody used it cleverly when he wanted to remind him of who he still was. Who he would never stop being.

"I'll sit down when I have your word."

"Sirius..." whispered Lily pleadingly, but Sirius ignored her. Moody's gaze grew increasingly displeased.

"I think you need to get some fresh air, Black."

Sirius pounded the table again, all eyes on him. "Do you want me to spell it out again?"

Moody's next words sounded threatening. "Potter, escort your friend outside for a moment, the adults want to talk."

It didn't take much. Sirius almost walked up to him and smacked that condescending look off his face. Just the idea gave him satisfaction. But James was faster, grabbed him by the arm and pulled him away from the table, towards the terrace.

Sirius reluctantly let it happen, but didn't break his gaze with the Auror, until he felt the cold air on his forearms and the terrace door slammed shut with a loud clack.

"What are you doing, Pads? Are you trying to get kicked out of the Order?" James sounded upset.

"I want to save my friend! Is that too much to ask?"

"Do you really think you're in any shape to do that right now? Even I'm not sure you wouldn't just storm off when you're standing in front of your family's house. Moony's life is on the line here!"

"You think I don't know that?" shouted Sirius back, his voice breaking. His damned eyes began to burn again. "You think I don't think about that every second? What they're doing to him while we're here having this chitchat?"

James still looked annoyed, but he lowered his voice. "It's terrible, and not just for you Padfoot, believe me. But we have to be smart about it, or we'll never see him again."

For the first time since the news, Sirius felt tears in his eyes. He hated

to cry, had learned to hate it. He turned away from James, feeling weak and vulnerable. He just wanted him back. He had so much to tell him.

"Sirius," James's voice sounded softer now, more empathetic. "We're doing everything we can. We all want him back. You have to trust us."

Sirius didn't know what to say. Why didn't anyone understand him? Why wasn't he, of all people, allowed to help?

"Come here," James said, pulling him into a gentle hug. Sirius was ashamed of his tears, but allowed the hug, pressing his face into James's shoulder.

It took him some time to calm down. By the time he finally persuaded James to return to the table, the meeting was winding down.

"The plan is in place," Moody said curtly, his gaze focused exclusively on James. All other eyes were on Sirius. He was avoiding them. And realized that he had lost this fight.

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Sirius, on James's advice, had swallowed his pride and stuttered out an apology. Moody had then looked at him appraisingly for a moment, and then only asked him what he could tell him about Grimmauld Place. If Moody was anything, he was pragmatic.

Sirius told him everything he knew about what traps and curses might be lurking at the entrance, and where he thought Remus was. Moody took note, nodding, and then sent Sirius away. "You'll get a Patronus when news breaks." There were a lot of things Sirius wanted to respond to him at that moment, but this time he refrained.

After that, it was only a matter of hours. Lily and James took him to their flat again, and Sirius was glad they did. The three of them sat down at the dinner table afterwards, talking sporadically about the meeting or remaining silent. After just two hours, the first Patronus arrived.

"*Reconnaissance results successful, vulnerability identified. Launching liberation in about 30 minutes. Gideon Prewett, James Potter, Dorcas Meadowes, Stugis Podmore and Frank Longbottom please be at the Potters*

house by then."

James was instantly on his feet, full of energy. Lily had to restrain him from rushing off to the fireplace immediately. "Take it easy. Take a minute," she said, grabbing his hand. James just nodded, his shoulders tense, his gaze focused. Sirius felt a sting as he thought about the fact that James was getting to be there for the rescue, but not him.

Lily stood up and put her hands on James's shoulders. "Take care of yourself, please," she said softly. James nodded and pulled her close, kissing her tenderly.

They held each other for a moment after that, looking lovingly into each other's eyes. Sirius averted his gaze, an indefinable feeling in his chest. He didn't respond to James until he was standing right in front of him.

"See you later, Pads." Sirius nodded and pulled James into a fleeting hug.

"I'll bring him back," he added confidently.

Sirius patted him on the shoulder. "I should hope so."

James looked him in the eye for a bit longer, then turned away. A few moments later, he had dissolved into green flames.

Lily and Sirius struggled even more to drown their tension in conversation. At one point, relatively early in their ordeal, Lily said out of nowhere, "I think Moody lied to you, by the way."

"About what?" Sirius frowned.

"When he said you weren't suitable because of your emotionality." She fussed. "Well, I mean, that's surely not without some... basis," she worded carefully. "But I rather think he did it to protect you."

"You think?" Sirius couldn't quite follow her.

"Yeah" Lily nodded emphatically. "You're a Black... You live a dangerous life in the Order as it is. He probably wanted to spare you from seeing your family again in this house."

"Hm," Sirius said, thinking about it for a while. There were certainly nicer things than returning to his old hell, but for Moony, he would

have done it without hesitation. Maybe, with a little luck, he could have even cursed Bella in the process.

After that, silence fell over them both again. Every few seconds Sirius's eyes wandered to the window, looking for blue light, yet dreading it. Now he was afraid not only for Moony, but also for his other best friend.

He forced himself not to think too hard about what a failure of this mission could mean. What it would mean to him if the two most important people in his life did not return.

It was late afternoon when the lynx returned. Lily saw him first, nudging Sirius wildly with her elbow, who instantly snapped out of his trance and stared at the Patronus like an evil spirit. In slow motion, he opened his muzzle:

"Mission successful. Lupin rescued. Now lying in St. Mungos. He will recover. No other casualties."

Sirius felt Lily fall around his neck and it took him a moment to fight off the shock and return the hug.

"They did it! Sirius, they got him!", exclaimed Lily excitedly, jumping with joy. Tears of relief welled up in Sirius's eyes and he took a deep breath. The crushing grip around his chest loosened, the heaviness finally lifted from him.

"Yes," he whispered back, shaking his head in disbelief. "They got him."

"Come on, let's go! James must be there, too!" Lily shouted full of energy and pulled Sirius along with her. They dressed quickly and apparated together to the front of the hospital.

It took a few minutes of patience before the nurses finally told them where Remus was lying, and they ran there as fast as they could.

Half a dozen members of the order had gathered outside his room, some visibly rattled. Frank Longbottom's cloak was scorched, and Dorcas Meadowes's curly black hair seemed affected by fire as well. But they were all unharmed. Sirius and Lily made their way through the crowd, patting everyone on the back, and pushed their way into Remus's room.

When Sirius caught sight of Remus, his heart sank. He looked awful. His entire face was swollen from beatings, covered in bruises. His hand was badly broken, inflamed and swollen, his arms covered with cuts. Several healers stood around him, carefully pouring potions and trying to tend to his wounds. A few feet from the bed, his eyes fixed firmly on Remus's unconscious form, stood James.

"Prongs!" greeted Sirius excitedly, joining James.

James, visibly exhausted, turned to him and Lily and smiled in relief. "We got him." Lily fell around James's neck and showered him with kisses. Sirius took another look at Remus.

"How was it?" asked Sirius in a hushed voice once Lily had released James.

James sighed, "Not easy. Took a while for us to find a good moment. Once we were inside, Rodolphus Lestrange launched a fireball at us, we hardly managed to escape." He paused and looked at Remus with pity. "It looked terrible in there. They messed him up pretty bad."

"Was he conscious yet?"

"No, I'm afraid not. But I think once the healers are done, it's just a matter of time."

"Yes, hopefully." Sirius watched them wave their wands and Remus's facial swelling slowly going down, his natural shape returning. They also rubbed his cuts, and healed and bandaged his broken hand. It had a soothing effect on Sirius. Finally, when the healers were done, one of them approached them.

"He's all right so far. He needs a lot of rest though, his body is at its limit. You may stay here for a while, but the crowd outside the door has to go."

James looked at him gratefully. "Thank you." The doctor just nodded and hurriedly left the room. Now that nothing stood between him and Remus, Sirius almost didn't dare come closer. It felt surreal, the last few hours like weeks. He fixated on Remus, his light brown hair, the almost peaceful look on his face.

He sat down by his bed, tucked him in neatly, stroked his flattened hair gently. For the third time in a few hours, he felt tears in his eyes, and this time he allowed them. He allowed himself this one moment of weakness. He had him back, he had him back. He had been given a

second chance.

And this time he would not let it pass.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Suspicious Minds' by Elvis Presley

So, Remus is back. Great, right? RIGHT??
I’m sorry.

Hope you liked it!!

See ya :))

Chapter 7: Red

Chapter Notes

CW Torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stain of red that colors the pavement

Painted with blood of somebody you love

Is this the sacrifice for the broken?

Losing the purest of what's in your heart

A few hours earlier.

There were three people in the room with him. In front of him stood a pale, thin woman, with frizzy black hair and heavily made-up eyes. She had leaned down towards him, smelling like a mixture of cold smoke and intrusive, sweet perfume.

Behind her, half turned away, stood a tall man with long, straw-blond hair and small eyes that stared at him suspiciously. The third person was tall, elegantly dressed, attractive. The only person in the room whose name he already knew, whose name mattered. Lord Voldemort.

"So, what's your name?" the woman asked. She had an annoying, raspy voice.

"Remus Lupin," he said disinterestedly, leaning back in the uncomfortable chair they had maneuvered him into after his trip from the basement.

"How old are you?"

"18"

"And who exactly are you?"

He sighed in annoyance. "I'm a werewolf, my father is the wizard Lyall Lupin, my mother is a muggle. I graduated from Hogwarts last year. I live in London, I'm a member of the Order of the Phoenix. My best friends are James Potter and Sirius Black."

"And what is your mission?"

"Keep a low profile. Gather information. Wait for the right moment," Remus looked at Voldemort. "Destroy the Order." Voldemort nodded, satisfied. Remus massaged the back of his neck with his uninjured hand. His body was battered, crying out in pain with every little movement; it was irritating. But his head was surprisingly clear.

"That sounds good," the woman said. She straightened up again, but the unpleasant smell lingered in his nose. He clicked his tongue. Voldemort's opinion interested him much more.

As if he seemed to suspect it, Voldemort finally started moving, coming closer, looking at him like a proud father. Remus did not avert his eyes.

"You seem to be learning quickly," Voldemort said, his voice smooth, melodious.

Remus jutted his chin challengingly. "I'm a good listener."

"Lucius here is a good teacher, too." He pointed to the other man in the room, who didn't look like he was particularly comfortable. Remus looked him over carefully, trying to memorize his face. Lucius was his name, then.

"Well, it didn't sound like he knew me very well," Remus scoffed. "But I suppose it's enough to get started."

"You'll learn most of it again when you get back. Though it won't be easy not to arouse suspicion in the process. But I'm convinced you'll handle it. You seem promising."

"Are you sure, my lord, that this is a good idea?" the blond man asked cautiously.

The Dark Lord looked at Lucius sharply. "Are you saying you don't have faith in my abilities?"

Shocked, he shook his head. "I would never do that, my lord. However, I did know ... this Remus Lupin, at least fleetingly. His

friends will know immediately that something is wrong. Whatever is sitting there now doesn't resemble him in the slightest."

Remus scowled at him. "I can very well manage it. I don't have to pretend here, so I won't. But as soon as I get back, I'm going to be exactly the stupid, worthless failure I need to be. I'll convince everyone."

The lord looked pleased.

"That's what I want to hear," he purred, turning to the woman. "It won't be long before they track him down here. We need to get everything ready to make it look convincing."

"I'll set everything in motion," the woman said eagerly, and left the room.

"Remus, I'm heartbroken, but we'll have to prepare you again," Voldemort said regretfully. "You should not look as if we have spared you in any way."

Remus nodded obediently. "Of course."

"But before you do," Remus saw something flash in his eyes for a second, "I'd like to test something."

He looked to Lucius, who seemed to shrink under his gaze. "Lucius, thank you for your service. You are no longer needed," he said sweetly, as if he were in a particularly generous mood. "But do me a favor and send Regulus in on your way out. His moment has come."

Lucius nodded, obviously relieved to be leaving. Remus looked after him disapprovingly. What kind of followers were they, barely able to take a straight step for fear of their leader?

Lucius held the door open and through stepped a slender, pale guy, with black hair and an over-straight posture. His face looked petrified, tense. He walked straight to Voldemort and obediently bowed his head.

"Here I am," he said, his voice calm, but Remus felt it quiver subliminally. He was in trouble.

"Very good, Regulus," Voldemort said. "Turn to our new member, I'm sure he has some questions."

Regulus turned to Remus, but avoided his gaze, staring fixedly at the floor instead. "My lord, I doubt I know anything of value."

"I beg to differ," Voldemort objected calmly. "We must prepare Remus as best we can for his return. Unfortunately, a side effect of the treatment is that he has lost not only all memories of himself, but also of all his friends. And I'm sure of all the people in this house, you know those friends best."

Regulus stared at the floor as if he wanted to pierce it with his gaze.

Remus raised an eyebrow. "In that case...who exactly are Sirius Black and James Potter? I hear those names all the time, but I can't do anything with them. Who am I dealing with?"

Regulus's gaze shot upward, hitting him like a spear. Somewhat taken aback, he leaned back. Regulus looked as if something was bubbling inside him, wanting to erupt. But he didn't let it out, instead closing his eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath.

"Sirius Black," he began in a strained voice. "Is my brother. He was the heir of House Black, which swore allegiance to Voldemort. But he lost his way and left his family. Joined the enemy. He is... not to be trusted."

"I figured," Remus said, actively trying to remember him for the first time. He must have known this Sirius quite well if they had supposedly been friends for so long. But there was nothing in his mind, nothing but emptiness.

"And what's he like, as a person?" asked Remus.

Regulus swallowed. "Temperamental. Moody, selfish. Maintains an unhealthily close friendship with James Potter, which at one point was even more important to him than his own family." Bitterness mingled in his voice.

"And how does he feel about me?" asked Remus straightforwardly.

Regulus's eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "Um, right. You've been friends for a long time too, known each other since first year at school. Were part of the same clique. You called yourselves 'the marauders'."

Remus snorted. "What a stupid name."

Regulus nodded. "And as for James Potter," his gaze flitted for a millisecond to Voldemort, who regarded him like a snake regards its prey. "I can't say much more about him. I hardly knew him."

"Don't lie," Voldemort whispered, sounding dangerous. Regulus's body stiffened like a board.

"I really don't know much about him, just that he's Sirius's best friend. Used to play Quidditch, is just as arrogant as Sirius. But ... that's all there is."

Voldemort took a deep breath. "Regulus. You know I can tell when I'm being lied to, don't you? Why are you doing this? What are you afraid of?"

Remus knew exactly what Regulus was afraid of, and somehow it amused him. They were a bunch of shits on Voldemort's side, it was pathetic.

"My lord, I am not afraid. I'm telling the truth."

Even Remus could tell he was lying now, and he wondered why. What was there to know about this blood traitor that was worth incurring Voldemort's wrath for?

Voldemort sighed theatrically, but seemed more amused than incensed. Remus watched his expression with interest, trying to follow him.

Voldemort extended his hand meaningfully. "Regulus, I am heartbroken, but I was half expecting something like this. You have some learning to do, let Remus help you with that."

Regulus stared at the outstretched hand, looking irritated. "What do you mean?"

"Give me your wand," Voldemort whispered softly. " You won't need it for the next few minutes."

Realization flooded Regulus's face. "But, my lord," he whispered back. Voldemort shook his head, emphatically. "Do not resist, or it will get much worse, I promise you."

With trembling fingers, Regulus pulled out his wand and handed it to Voldemort, who immediately made it disappear into his cloak.

Friendly, he then turned to Remus. "My dear Remus, we have already established that your magic skills have not suffered from the amnesia. However, I would like to be sure about this one more time."

Remus nodded and rummaged for his wand. "What do you want me to do?"

Voldemort pointed at the quivering Regulus. "Punish him."

"Okay." He stood up and raised his wand.

"Crucio," he said, watching with interest as Regulus collapsed in front of him. Remus could see him fighting with all his might, but he couldn't stop small, agonized cries from escaping him. He curled up like an injured dog, twitching wildly, suffering. It was pathetic.

He continued until Voldemort raised his hand. Then he casually released the curse and put his wand away again.

"That should do it," Voldemort said, looking pleased. "You have shown me that you belong with us. You will be an asset to my Death Eaters."

"It'll be my pleasure."

Voldemort's smile died as he looked to Regulus, who seemed slow to recover from the curse.

"Stand up," he ordered coldly. Regulus instantly scrambled to his feet, his face reddened and twisted in pain.

"Have you learned your lesson now?" the dark lord hissed.

Regulus jutted his chin, trying to regain his dignity. "Yes, my lord."

"Will you tell the truth next time I demand it of you?"

"Yes, my lord." Remus saw tears glisten in his eyes.

"Very well," Voldemort said. "Then leave. I don't want to see you again today."

He handed Regulus his wand, who accepted it wordlessly. He brushed the dust from his clothes and walked away with his head held high. However, not without taking one last look at Remus. There was a lot in it: Remus recognized hatred, disgust, anger. But also something else, something he couldn't really put into words. But then Regulus turned his gaze away again, letting the door fall into the lock behind

him, and Remus didn't waste another thought on him.

"The time is almost ripe" Voldemort said. "Bellatrix will make sure you look as convincing as possible. Once you've blended back in, you keep a low profile for the first few weeks. Let the dust settle, eradicate any suspicions. Only then will you become active and pass on all the information you've been able to gather up to that point. So be patient."

"Understood."

"Do you have any more questions?"

Remus smiled, slyly. "None."

He was ready for the Order. For the rat's nest. Would scour every dirty inch of it. And then, when he had them all in hand, when they were all dancing to his tune, he would set it ablaze. Would leave nothing of it.

It would be a feast.

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When Remus awoke in the hospital room, it was dark. He was lying comfortably, covered up to his neck, and any pain in his body was pleasantly numbed by painkillers and potions. He took a deep breath, feeling air rush into his lungs, creating an uncomfortable pressure in his chest. A rib must have been hit. Bellatrix had overdone it a bit with her preparation.

He could already move his left hand again, even if it still felt clumsy and awkward. Carefully he scanned the headboard of his bed, looking for the light switch. Finally he found it and turned on the small bedside lamp.

The warm light blinded him, but he quickly got used to it, blinked twice, and was then able to look around the room. Surprised, Remus noticed he was not alone. Right by his bed, at the level of his thigh, was a guy sitting on an uncomfortable-looking stool. He had rested his upper body on the edge of his bed and laid his head on his arms. He was sleeping peacefully, his face turned towards Remus.

Remus regarded him intently for a moment. He looked very much like Regulus, had the same curly black hair, the same high cheekbones, the same long eyelashes. This had to be Sirius Black.

What was he doing at his bedside in the middle of the night?

Were you this clingy when you were good friends? Remus looked at the sleeping figure disparagingly. How did you react when you were free again after being kidnapped? Did you fall into each other's arms? Did you start crying with relief? Remus had no idea. Probably it was best if he waited to see how Sirius reacted and then mirrored it.

He played with the idea of just turning off the lights again and not dealing with the problem at his bedside until morning. But Sirius threw a wrench in his plans when, at that very moment, he began to stir and sighed softly. Probably blinded by the light, he squinted his eyes and eventually opened them a little.

Remus just managed to suppress an eye roll before Sirius snapped his eyes open and sat up abruptly. The entire right side of his face was covered in the marks of his sweater and Remus's bedspread. He looked exhausted, pale and worn out, but when he looked at Remus, he was beaming all over. Remus put on a smile, hoping it looked genuine.

"Hey, Sirius," he whispered. He didn't know why, but those two little words were enough to make Sirius burst into tears.

"Moony!" he cried, whatever that meant, and fell around his neck. Remus groaned as a sharp pain shot through his chest.

"Watch out! I don't think... my ribs are fully healed yet."

Immediately, Sirius eased up. "Sorry!" he said, but didn't fully release the hug. Remus hesitated for a moment, then returned it, placing his hands gently on Sirius's back. Felt his body tremble underneath them. It felt strange, but he would be damned if he let on.

"I'm so glad you're back, Moony," Sirius whispered into the crook of his neck, and Remus tried to memorize his apparent nickname.

"I always come back," he replied, hoping it sounded like a phrase Remus would utter when a friend was crying in his arms.

Sirius slowly broke away from him and looked at him, his eyes red but his smile unbroken. His face was uncomfortably close, but Remus tried not to back away. Allowed Sirius to take a hand from Remus's

shoulder and put it to the side of his face. He came even closer.

Remus swallowed, trying to keep his face under control. What was that all about? What was he doing?

He returned Sirius's gaze, who looked at him as if he were the greatest thing in the world. And before he could say anything, he felt Sirius lean forward and press his lips gently on his.

It was a simple, brief contact, lasting no more than the blink of an eye, but it was enough for Remus to drop his mask completely. He was glad Sirius had closed his eyes, because there was no way he would have missed the shock that overshadowed Remus's face at that moment. He felt the overwhelming urge to push Sirius away, but he caught himself at the last moment.

What the absolute hell...?

Sirius broke away from him and opened his eyes again. Remus tried to smile, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, so at least he tried to keep a neutral expression. Sirius seemed to notice something was off. Somewhat sadly, he smiled and stroked Remus's cheek with his thumb.

"I'm sorry if I caught you off guard. I know we didn't part on the best of terms last time. But I've been blaming myself the whole time for not coming clean with you... it's been eating me up."

"What do you mean?" asked Remus, completely perplexed. Did that mean that they were...?

"It means that I feel the same way as you." Sirius looked at him tenderly, full of love, it made Remus feel sick. "I just need some time. To come clean with myself. You know how I grew up, what this means for me... I hope you understand."

Remus said nothing back, absolutely not knowing what to say. Why hadn't anyone prepared him for this? Had Regulus known? This changed everything, this ...

No.

A small, mischievous voice spoke up in his head.

This doesn't change everything. It just makes it better.

Sirius seemed hurt by his blank response, and he averted his eyes. "Of course, I can understand if you don't want to do this for now... I've not exactly been-"

"No," Remus objected, stifling a snide laugh. He sensed it, his chance. The chance to make himself irreplaceable, untouchable. It would probably take a lot out of him, but it would be so *worth* it.

"No," he repeated, to give the word even more emphasis. He grabbed Sirius by the shoulders so he couldn't back away and looked at him piercingly.

"I want this." He smiled innocently, happily. "If I'm honest, I've been waiting for this all along."

The look on Sirius's face was enough to know that Remus already had complete and utter control over him.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Red' by Survive Said The Prophet

Thanks for the kudos, subscriptions and comments btw! I really really appreciate them, huge motivation <3

Hope you liked the chapter!

See ya;)

Chapter 8: Bright Lies

Chapter Notes

CW Mentions of Torture, Emotional Manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bright lies shine on

Illusions past ages ago

From a distance

See myself existing

Pretend to feel your undertow

Even though Remus had decided to embrace the new circumstances and use them to his advantage, he was still glad that Sirius wasn't trying to kiss him for a while. This way, he could better prepare himself mentally for what was now inevitably coming his way: questions, tons of them.

When Sirius had brought him a coffee in the morning, he had announced that Moody wanted to visit him, now that he had woken up. Lucius had told him a bit about the most important members of the Order, including Alastor Moody, the grumpy and above all extremely suspicious Auror.

He hoped that Remus's circumstances were enough to keep him from coming right around the corner with Veritaserum or any control questions. He desperately needed time to settle into Remus Lupin's life. In the beginning, he could still blame many inconsistencies on the torture. But eventually, that wouldn't be enough.

"I'm sure it won't take him long. Then you can go back to resting," Sirius reassured him, seeming to notice that it was keeping Remus busy. He was damn observant, this could become a problem.

"Yeah, I'll just tell him everything I remember, that's all I can do

anyway," Remus muttered and Sirius squeezed his hand in affirmation.

"That's right."

Moody was quite an imposing figure. When he entered the room, he immediately caught Remus's attention. He was tall, had a piercing gaze, and many scars that dug into his face, not so dissimilar to his own. Remus knew immediately that he was not to be messed with.

Moody nodded a greeting to him and Sirius, used his wand to push a chair to Remus's bedside, and took a seat on it.

"Lupin, good to have you back with us. Kept us quite busy." He eyed Remus up and down, but didn't seem hostile.

"Yes, I'm very glad, too. Thank you for working so hard to save me."

Moody nodded. "The Order leaves no one behind."

"It was a damn close call, though," Remus said, doing exactly what the coward Lucius had advised him to do: Go on the offensive, tell them everything, stay as close to the truth as possible.

Moody raised his eyebrows. "Tell us what happened, in as much detail as you can. We need to know what the Death Eaters might have learned."

Remus nodded, playing his part artfully, pressing his lips together, clutching at the covers. He felt Sirius, sitting close to him, stroking his back soothingly.

"They locked me in the basement. Bellatrix Lestrange was there and ..." He glanced sideways. "Sirius's brother."

The hand at his back stilled.

"Did he torture you?" asked Sirius, the calm in his voice threatening. Moody gave him an angry look, but Sirius didn't seem to notice it at all. His eyes were dark with anger. Regulus's dislike seemed to be mutual.

Remus shook his head. He didn't know for sure, but when he imagined how Regulus was writhing under his curse, he just couldn't picture it. "No, but he was watching."

Sirius huffed. Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head, his gaze fixed on the ground.

"Please go on, Lupin," Moody urged.

Remus obeyed. "Bellatrix did most of it. She tortured me." Remus looked down at his lap, "But she wasn't that interested in information about the Order, oddly enough."

Moody's eyebrows drew together. "In what, then?"

"They wanted me to be their spy." Now it was on the table. Attack was the best defense. There was no reaction on Moody's face, but Sirius beside him drew in an audible breath.

After letting the sentence linger for a moment, Remus continued quietly. "They said they wanted to take advantage of my close connection to the Order so they could stay one step ahead. I told them I'd rather die than join them."

Sirius's hand wandered to Remus's shoulder, squeezing it lightly, affectionately, proudly. It was irritating how much nuance, how much subtlety there was in his actions, in all his movements.

"Bellatrix then put that very much to the test... It went on for hours, her beating me down, with Cruciatus, mostly, but then she also started attacking me physically. At some point I didn't even know where I was anymore, or if I was even alive. I think I was on the verge of losing my mind."

Sirius's gaze burned on him, but in his imagination Remus was too embarrassed to return the look, so he looked past him and Moody out the window. "It wouldn't have taken much more."

Briefly, he wondered if he should cry now. Was Remus Lupin the kind of person who cried? Or was he the type who kept everything bottled up until he eventually exploded? He was a werewolf, these people were probably used to keeping everything to themselves. So he decided to go for the stunned, traumatized reaction. His gaze went blank.

Sirius hugged him. It felt heavy, full of sorrow. Remus didn't return it.

Moody waited until Sirius had pulled away again before speaking up. "I can imagine that wasn't easy."

Wow, very insightful, Remus thought mockingly. Moody seemed almost as emotionless and clumsy as him.

Outwardly, he just shook his head theatrically. "It was hell. I can't describe it with words."

Moody seemed to be thinking hard.

"And you're sure you didn't give anything away? Didn't you fall victim to Legilimency? Didn't someone slip you some Veritaserum?"

Remus shook his head emphatically. "I just kept telling her to go to hell, at least while I could still talk. I swear I didn't give anything away."

"I'm going to kill her," Sirius whispered to himself. "I'll find her, and I'll kill her myself."

"Calm down," Moody said sharply to Sirius. "We will surely find a way for revenge soon."

"It won't be enough," Sirius whispered darkly, but left it at that.

Moody sighed. "If that's really true, then we owe you a debt of gratitude, Lupin. Not everyone would have lasted this long. However," he sat up straight. "All this implies a new, big problem."

He looked meaningfully from Remus to Sirius. "From now on, we have to be even more careful. The danger that we will soon have a spy in our ranks is imminent. We must think of new security mechanisms..." He drifted off, lost in thought.

Remus hesitantly agreed with him. "They seemed very determined with the spy."

Moody nodded, his eyebrows drawn so tightly together that his small eyes almost seemed to disappear beneath them. "I'll talk it over with Elphias. We'll figure something out. We've been playing with the idea of working out a system for control questions and information sharing for some time. After all, you never know if everyone is who they seem."

Remus didn't let on how little he liked this. He wasn't sure of trivia, on any level. He didn't even know his own mother's name anymore. If this system really came into play soon, he was fucked.

"Well, I've had enough for now," Moody grumbled, obviously heavy with the new information. "I'll get back to you soon. For now, get some rest."

He rose and Remus was about to inwardly sigh in relief when Moody spoke up again, "By the way... I'm sorry it came to this. I wasn't paying attention, it shouldn't have happened."

Remus didn't know exactly what he meant. "It's okay."

Moody looked at him searchingly for a moment, then turned away and said goodbye. Remus didn't breathe a sigh of relief until Moody had left the room. He too had some thinking to do now.

Sirius was withdrawn after the visit. Shortly after Moody left, he excused himself, saying he needed to "get some fresh air." He looked worn and angry, but Remus let him go without a word.

Sirius returned a little later, his cheeks and the tip of his nose red from the cold air, but his expression no less troubled.

"Listen," Remus said carefully, looking at him with concern. "I'm sorry if I said too much earlier." Sirius looked at him, startled, and shook his head.

"No! Don't blame yourself!" He grabbed Remus's hand. "It was important that you told him all that, and I'm glad I know it too." He pressed his lips together. "It's just... knowing that this all happened to you, that it was almost too late, it's killing me."

Oh, you poor, clueless fool.

"But it wasn't too late," Remus whispered, placing his second hand on Sirius's. "It's all right."

"No," Sirius said, painfully. "It's not all right, Moony."

Remus went with the dreary mood and looked down at his lap. He thought of the soon to come problem with the control questions and decided to take advantage of Sirius's weepiness.

He concentrated, not blinking, staring at the blanket until a little later he felt tears in his eyes. Feigning shame, he hastily wiped the tears away. It seemed to have the desired effect: Sirius noticed, his face

dripping with sorrow. He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed and stroked his face, carefully, as if he might break. This was the moment.

"Sirius, I," he began chokingly, hoping his tear glands would do their job. "I didn't want to admit it to Moody, but...The torture did some things to me."

Remus saw the fear in Sirius's eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I'm so confused, I..." He sniffed, "Some things I just don't remember right now. Maybe it's just shock and it will resurface, but everything is so messed up right now. I'm sorry."

Sirius also had tears in his eyes. "Don't be sorry," he breathed, hugging him, the touch as gentle as his hand had been earlier. Remus clung to him, pressing his face into Sirius's shoulder. Pretended to cry, let himself fall.

"This will all come back, I'm sure of it," Sirius whispered, stroking his back. "It's just a lot for you right now, understandably."

"And what if it doesn't?" he whispered back, muffled by Sirius's sweater.

"Then you'll always have me," he replied, tightening the hug. "You can always ask me. I'll remember for you."

That was exactly what he wanted to hear. His free pass.

"Thank you," he mumbled, willingly letting himself be held for a few minutes longer.

***

His tearful performance had not improved Sirius's mood, on the contrary. But Remus didn't care much anymore; he had secured himself the next few weeks for now. He patted Sirius's arm here and there, and thought about what information was the most important now.

He had to find out where he lived, what his daily routine was like, what the important key dates were. These were going to be

challenging days.

His recovery was going fast. Throughout the day, doctors came in and praised his healing process. Remus was sure that he would be allowed to leave soon. In the meantime, several members of the Order also visited him, and Remus tried to memorize names and sidenote information and not act as if they were all complete strangers to him.

He met a Frank and his wife Alice, at least he had gathered their marriage from the rings. He met a girl named Marlene, who he probably knew better, considering the warmth of her embrace, and finally two brothers, one of whom was named Fabian. Slowly he got there.

The most interesting and at the same time risky visit, however, was that of his best friends. They came in threes, in the afternoon, probably because of some shift. One of them was quite tall, had full brown hair and wore glasses with round lenses. He was holding the hand of a red-haired girl who had a heart-shaped, pretty face and was beaming at Remus. Next to them walked another guy, he was short, chubby and had big, watery eyes. But he too was grinning broadly, appearing elated. Remus returned the smile.

"Moony!" shouted the one with the glasses, and he was the first to hug him. Remus would be relieved if this constant hugging came to an end soon.

"Hey," Remus replied familiarly, wondering if that was James. The brown-haired man released the hug and beamed at him so broadly that Remus felt blinded by it.

"You're finally awake," he said, patting him brotherly on the shoulder. "Really gave us a scare."

"Sorry," Remus said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Don't be! We're just glad you're back."

"James, we're here too! Make room!" the red-haired girl said, confirming Remus's suspicions. James chuckled and moved aside so his girlfriend could give another one of those annoying hugs. It was a warm one, unexcited, calm, but full of trust. Remus guessed that they must like each other a lot. Now he just had to learn her name.

The third in the group didn't miss the hug either. Remus deduced that this had to be Peter Pettigrew, the fourth in their clique that Lucius had mentioned.

After he had let this greeting pass him as well, he looked at the figures intently. James had put an arm around Sirius, who had risen from his stool in greeting and was forcing a smile. James whispered something to Sirius that made him laugh honestly, even if it still looked a bit constrained. It didn't take Remus long to realize that James was the center, the heart of the group.

But what's so special about you that Regulus Black would even let himself be tortured for you?

Peter snapped him out of his thoughts. "James has already told us a bit... Must have been really bad."

Remus just nodded, hoping that he wouldn't have to play the role of the tortured victim again. He was grateful for the warning look Sirius gave Peter. Peter flinched and did not ask any further questions.

The girl tried to cover the awkward silence. "You look a lot better than you did yesterday, though! The doctors really did a great job."

Remus returned her encouraging smile. "Yes, the doctors think I can be released soon."

"Thank goodness! You've been spending a little too much time in the hospital lately, for my taste," James grinned, giving him a knowing look.

Am I?

"Haha, yeah. Looking forward to my own bed again."

"I bet you are!"

Fortunately, their visit didn't go beyond the usual banter, and Remus was able to focus on memorizing details in their behavior. Every little detail could become important, whether it was the obvious relationship between the girl, Lily, he was learning, and James, whether it was Peter's uncertain, reassurance-seeking sideways glances, or the way James sometimes looked back and forth between Remus and Sirius. It was like a puzzle that he was putting together

piece by piece. It was the first step of illuminating. The rat's nest was showing itself to him more and more.

In the evening, long after the last visitors had left - except for Sirius, who hardly left his side even for a minute - the doctor finally released him to go home. Remus was tense, praying that Sirius wouldn't just say goodbye and disappear on his own.

When they were finally outside and Sirius held out his hand with a smile, he tried not to let his relief show. A second later, they were standing in front of a large flat, apparently on the outskirts of London. Sirius rummaged a key out of his pocket and unlocked it. Remus hesitated for a moment. Was this Sirius's flat, or his own, and Sirius had only kept the key?

Sirius had entered and held the door open for him. "What are you waiting for, Moony?"

Irritated, Remus followed the prompting and entered, looking around the small hallway. Sirius closed the door and took off his coat, hanging it on one of the hooks, throwing his shoes into the corner. When he saw that Remus still had his coat on and was standing around aimlessly, he held out his hands helpfully. "Does your rib hurt? Do you need help taking it off?"

"Uh yeah, that would be nice." Remus let himself be helped and then at least took off his shoes on his own. A suspicion crept up on him, an unpleasant, dangerous one.

He put on a good face, sat down on the dreadful yellow couch as if it were the most natural thing in the world. But in his head it was working like crazy. He waited for a good opportunity, while Sirius was doing something in the kitchen, and looked around the place inconspicuously.

Everything screamed it, the two toothbrushes in the bathroom, the two furnished, obviously inhabited rooms, the clothes in the closet that matched far too closely what Remus had worn during his imprisonment.

The two of them lived together.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Bright Lies' by Giant Rooks (Absolutely fantastic band, check them out!)

And the oscar goes to…

:D

See ya! :)

Chapter 9: Weakness

Chapter Notes

CW Panic Attack, Dark Thoughts, (Very) Minor OC Death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weaknesses.

You had none,

I had one:

I loved.

The mood at the table was tense. Regulus had never appreciated the atmosphere around his mother, but this was a different caliber. There was something personal about the way she shredded the filet with the knife. Regulus had been mentally prepared for the rant for minutes.

"Bella told me what happened," she said in her slightly piqued, casual way. The calm before the storm. Regulus took a bite and ate calmly before replying just as casually, "Ah, yes."

Walburga stabbed the sliced meat with her fork, as if to make sure it was really dead. "Do you intend to explain yourself? Or do you have nothing to say about your failure yesterday?"

Regulus chewed the inside of his cheek. "What do you want me to say?" he replied. There was nothing to sugarcoat. He had failed, and he had failed right in front of Voldemort.

"Well, maybe what you're thinking, tarnishing the name of the whole Black family like that? Your cousin works so hard to keep the Dark Lord happy with us, and you lie to his face? You can't even manage to curse a damn half-breed? What do you want your father to think of you?"

I doubt my father has given me a single thought in the last few years.

"The dark lord has already given me the punishment for it."

"It was the least he could do." She had that accusatory tone again that Regulus knew all too well. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Then what else do you want?"

Her gaze sprayed venom. "That you realize the error of your ways. That you make an effort to bring honor to your house for a change."

It was wonderful. Regulus had given up his entire life, his dreams, his love, to serve Voldemort and please his mother. There he was showing a single moment of weakness, failing because of that damn werewolf and *James Potter*, and in his mother's eyes it was all worthless. Simply wonderful.

"I try to uphold my family's honor every day," Regulus said monotonously, as if reading the words off a cheat sheet.

"Then try harder."

"Yes, Mother." Regulus had lost his appetite.

***

Regulus was glad when he was finally in his room and could close the door behind him. He lay down on his neatly made bed and pressed the heels of his hands so hard on his eyes that he began to see colors. It still didn't erase the images in his mind. When things got too quiet, he continued to hear Remus' screaming, the begging, the pleading. When he let himself go too much, his face also appeared, frightening, strange. Then he looked again into the eyes of this thing that had taken the shell of a dead man. They filled him with deep horror, screaming at him, laughing at him for his incompetence.

You could have prevented it. That this monster was let loose on the world. But you can't even manage that.

Regulus took his hands from his eyes and turned to the side, staring at the ancient green and gold decorated wallpaper. Surely the fraud would be exposed. They were so fundamentally different, the old Remus and the new. Anyone who knew him had to notice that right away.

Especially Sirius, his stupid traitor of a brother, who was someone very sensitive behind his pretentious bravado. He had to notice it at the latest, had to. Especially if Regulus had been right and the two of them... he shook off the thought. Maybe the monster would never know about Remus's or Sirius's feelings. Maybe they would just stick to their friendship. And if they didn't... Sirius would know. For sure.

Regulus pulled his knees up to his body, making himself small. His natural reaction when his thoughts got too big. Sometimes it would catch them again. Sometimes they still got out of hand. In this case, he could only endure them.

"Oh Reg."

Regulus felt an index finger dig into his forehead, right between his eyebrows where deep brooding lines had formed.

"Don't think so much. Someday the wrinkles will stay."

Always the same game with him. Most days Regulus used to groan in annoyance and slap his hand away, but today he was in a good mood. He smiled indulgently. "You're right."

James grinned at him. "Has there ever been a time where I weren't?"

Sometimes, though, it helped to think of him.

***

A knock jolted him out of his sleep. Disoriented, he lifted his head, needed a moment before he knew where he was. He was still lying on his side, in his fetal position, and his back ached slightly. A glance out the window told him it was getting late.

"Yes?" He rubbed his eyes.

Kreacher's voice sounded muffled. "Sorry to disturb, Master Regulus. But there's a new mission."

It wasn't half an hour before Regulus was standing in full robes in a line with three other Death Eaters. In front of him, muffled by the ankle-high grass, Rodolphus Lestrange, Bella's husband, paced up and down. He was barely visible in the darkness.

"Beyond that embankment," he pointed his wand behind him, where the terrain rose steeply and merged into a line of trees, "is our destination."

Regulus wasn't sure which of the houses they'd been shadowing it was. He had been there himself on a couple of the scouting missions, but almost everything looked the same to him at night anyway.

"The dark lord has ordered us to kill Theobald Dowson. The wife and two children can stay alive if they don't get in the way."

The name sounded distantly familiar to Regulus; they had probably talked about him in one of the meetings. What he had done wrong, however, he no longer knew. It didn't matter anyway.

"It shouldn't be much of a problem. After our diversions, the Order should now be patrolling other houses and not getting in our way. To that end" Rodolphus pointed to the hooded figure to Regulus's left. "Crouch, you'll be the advance guard. You climb up the embankment and scout possible enemy. When the coast is clear, you'll signal."

A small sigh escaped Barty, which Regulus, as a longtime recipient of that sound, immediately recognized as displeasure. But he did not contradict.

"Understood."

Rodolphus pointed at Regulus and the person to his right. "Black, Malfoy, you two will join me in the attack. The goal is not to cause a big commotion, we'll get this over with quickly and without fuss."

He pointed to the last Death Eater, Avery. "You're the rear guard. Stay

outside the house in case something goes wrong."

Avery nodded.

Silence reigned briefly. "Do you have any questions?"

"Do I stay up on the embankment when you guys move out?" asked Barty, sounding bored now.

"Yeah, you keep a lookout and warn us if anything happens."

Regulus could just about imagine the look on his face.

"Anything else?"

No one stirred.

"Good, then get into position. Crouch, 15 minutes observation, minimum. After that, situation update."

Barty sighed again and went on his way. Regulus noticed Lestrange's gaze on him. "A word," he said, and Regulus nodded.

Lestrange made a dismissive motion to Avery and Malfoy. "You guys can relax for the next few minutes. Keep eye contact with Crouch, though," then he motioned Regulus to take a few steps with him.

"What's up?" asked Regulus once they were out of earshot. He had a bad feeling.

"The dark lord has spoken to me," Lestrange said quietly. "He says he's disappointed in your performance."

Who else was going to rub that in his face? He got the fucking poi....

"He specifically told me to take you this time," Lestrange continued, abruptly halting Regulus's train of thought.

"To prove my loyalty, or what?" he muttered, his poker face on to hide his fear.

Lestrange nodded. "Right. Now's your chance to clear your name. you will be the one to kill Dowson."

Regulus did not let anything on.

"It will be my honor," he replied, and Lestrange nodded in satisfaction.

"That's what I wanted to hear."

He went back to the others. Regulus could not follow him; his legs did not obey him. With a petrified expression, he looked up at the night sky. He longed for stars, for some light to shine down on him, to chase away his fear. But the sky was covered with clouds and Regulus was doomed to spend his last moments without blood on his hands in complete darkness.

***

It was a small, unremarkable house. Had a small front garden, neatly trimmed hedge, mowed grass. A kitschy garden gnome stood in it, beaming at them as if they were welcome guests. No traces of magic could be seen anywhere; it looked like a showcase suburban London muggle house. It was clear to Regulus how this was possible. The occupants of this house were familiar with the Muggle world. Probably Theobald Dowson, in particular.

Muggle-borns were dirty. That was something he had always been sure of as a child. His mother had whispered it to him and Sirius like a proverb, like their first, secret spell. He had believed it, fervently, had worn it outwardly like jewelry, had tried to convince everyone else of it as well. As you did as a decent pureblood.

But in the meantime things had changed. And the only thing Regulus knew was that he had no idea about what was right and what was wrong anymore.

Lestrange made short work of the door. He bombarded it with a spell, blew it open, tore it off its hinges. It made a huge noise, far too much for Regulus's taste, but Lestrange had always been a friend of big entrances.

They wasted no time, gave a quick hand signal to Avery, who was hidden in the shadows, and rushed into the house. Children's screams could be heard, but what Regulus was most aware of was his own panting breathing.

He ran after Malfoy, praying that he didn't know about Voldemort's intent and simply put an end to Dowson himself. They ran up the stairs, after the screaming that was turning more and more into helpless whimpering.

It took only a few minutes and two more broken doors before they had the family in front of them, completely distraught, in their pajamas. The mother had the children pressed against her, so terrified that they had gone completely quiet. Theobald Dowson stood before them, wand raised, his whole body shaking with tension.

"Get out of here!" he shouted in a raspy voice, spit flying towards them. He made a bizarre picture, in his plaid pajama pants, with hair sticking out wildly and marks from the pillow on his face. And in the last moments of his life.

Lestrange laughed. He had perfected his wicked, snide laugh for such occasions. Even Regulus felt his tension growing even more, however that was still possible.

"Lower your wand and surrender. Then no harm will come to your family," Lestrange rumbled menacingly, pointing his wand directly at Dowson's son.

"You're lying! You bloody Death Eaters are a bunch of bastards!"

"Careful," Malfoy hissed menacingly, as he always did when his pride was offended. "Otherwise, we'll reconsider our offer."

That seemed to make Dowson ponder for a moment. He certainly wasn't stupid; he knew he didn't stand a chance against three Death Eaters. But was he already aware that he was going to die? Could one even really understand that at such a moment?

As Dowson lowered his wand slightly, his wife spoke up. "Don't listen to them! They want to..." Regulus watched her, saw her glance wildly around, and her gaze ultimately fell on the dresser where her wand lay.

Immediately he raised his wand. "STUPEFY!" he yelled, and the woman collapsed between her children, who shrieked wildly, not understanding what had happened. Malfoy looked at Regulus frowning, but did not comment further. Regulus may seem like an overzealous rookie to him right now, but he was glad that he had possibly prevented her death that way.

Dowson cast a shocked glance at his wife, who was being held in her arms by her children and wept over as if she were dead. Enraged, he raised his wand again and screeched, "What was that about? She didn't do anything!"

"Calm down, you fucking mudblood!" roared Lestrange indignantly. "I'm going to give you exactly three seconds to drop that wand, or we'll kill your brats right in front of you!"

Dowson bared his teeth, his face red with rage.

"One."

His knees began to shake so violently that he threatened to lose his balance.

"Two."

With a clatter, the wand fell to the floor. Dowson sank to his knees, the tension draining from him like the air from a blown tire. "Please," he pleaded, looking at Regulus of all people, tears glistening in his eyes. "Spare my children."

"They don't deserve it. But we keep our promises," Lestrange said, also looking at Regulus. "It is time."

Regulus nodded biting the inside of his cheek so hard that it began to bleed. Purposefully, he raised his wand, holding it in front of Dowson's face, who was now shedding almost as many tears as his children. He looked at him pleadingly, a look Regulus would never forget again in his entire life.

Malfoy grabbed Dowson's wand and pocketed it. "Get on with it. We don't have forever."

Regulus barely heard him. He was fixated on Dowson's lips, which formed a soundless word, "Please."

He said goodbye. To Dowson, To his own innocence. Then he laughed at himself. As if he had ever been innocent at any point in his life. He was the bad guy. Had done evil, hurt people who didn't deserve it. This, this was just another chapter of that worthless life of his.

"Avada Kedavra."

A flash of green, then it was over. Dowson slumped to the side, hit the ground, and lay still. The children fell silent, looking up from their mother to their motionless father. It took a second for them to seem to understand. But then they did.

It was unbearable.

"Well done," Lestrange said over the shrieking. "Let's get out of here."

Regulus ran out of the room first, needing fresh air. He barely noticed as he left the house, ran past Avery, and climbed the embankment. He wanted to get away, as far away as he could.

"Wow, someone's fast," Barty quipped as he passed him. He had made himself comfortable in the tall grass, legs stretched out from him and a long blade of grass stuck in the corner of his mouth. "Did everything work out?"

Regulus nodded, still waiting for fresh air to enter his lungs, but with each successive breath he felt more like he was suffocating. He slid inelegantly down the embankment, wanting to be alone.

"You okay, Reg?" he heard Barty behind him. He had stood up and was patting the grass off his cloak.

"Everything... fine," Regulus muttered breathlessly. Where the hell was the rest?

"You'd think five Aurors were after you," Avery sneered a few seconds later as he appeared at the top of the embankment. "Didn't think you could even run with such a huge stick up your ass."

"Oh shut the fuck up, Avery," Barty retorted, annoyed. He waited until Lestrange and Malfoy were at his level and joined them on the way down. Finally, all five of them stood in a circle, visibly relieved. All except Regulus.

"Well, evaluation we'll do tomorrow morning at Malfoy's. For now, let's see about getting out of here," Lestrange said, nodding again to Regulus.

"Don't forget the most important thing," Malfoy said seriously, raising his wand solemnly in the air. "Mors Mordre!" Regulus's mark began to burn, while a much larger one dug into the dense clouds, bearing witness to his infamy. Regulus wanted to throw up.

"Well, see you later," Avery said, and was the first to disappear. Malfoy and Lestrange followed shortly after. Regulus turned away. If he disapparated now, he would empty his entire stomach contents. Besides, he couldn't stand that feeling of confinement, not when he already felt like he was suffocating anyway.

"Reg, what's wrong?" he heard Barty's voice behind him, but it

suddenly sounded like it was wrapped in cotton. Regulus tore the mask from his face, leaned forward, braced his hands on his knees, tried to breathe calmly, but no air reached his lungs. He breathed in, in, in, but it didn't help. He gasped, panic continuing to constrict his throat. He began to shake, stars dancing before his eyes.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and wanted to scream at Barty not to touch him, but he lacked the breath even for that. Barty's worried face appeared before him, hood and mask off, but his features blurred. Regulus gasped for air, feeling like he was suffocating, dying, here and now, as punishment for what he had done.

"Hey, Reg. Regulus!" said Barty loudly, grabbing him by both shoulders. "Straighten up, come on!" He shoved him into an upright position and Regulus let it happen, because there was nothing else for him right now but his constricted throat and wildly pounding heart.

Barty snapped in front of his face, "Hey, I'm here! Look at me!" Regulus tried to focus his gaze, his breathing shallow, way too fast, way too....

"Breathe out!", Barty commanded further. And Regulus tried, but he needed the air, he had way too little, he was suffocating, he....

Barty gave him a slap. It wasn't firm, but it brought him out of his trance. "Breathe out, I said! Look at me, do it like me!" Barty did it for him, exhaling emphatically slowly and inhaling just as slowly. Regulus stared at him, trying to imitate him. He felt like he was breathing for the first time in his life.

It took Regulus a few minutes to calm down enough to follow Barty's rhythm. But then it slowly got better. He clung to Barty's forearms and kept breathing, breathing the lump out of his throat, breathing until his heartbeat returned to normal. When Barty finally let go of him, Regulus felt as exhausted as if he'd run a marathon.

"You okay?"

Regulus nodded. Only now did he notice that his cheeks were wet. Hastily, he wiped his face with the sleeve of his cloak.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"You're welcome." Barty looked at him, frowning. "You want to talk about it?"

"No."

Barty sighed.

"Then at least come with me for a moment. It'll calm you down." He held out his hand.

"Where?" Regulus looked at the hand suspiciously.

"To a dark back alley where I can stab you and steal your wallet, you jerk."

Regulus sighed, "I just want to go home." Just fall into his bed and never get up again.

"Five fucking minutes," Barty groaned in annoyance.

Regulus almost just disapparated without a word. But Barty was a good friend, one of his only ones. He had guided him through this embarrassing panic attack. And it was possibly five minutes away from reality, away from what his head had in store for him.

He grabbed Barty's hand and found himself on the Hungerford Bridge a blink later.

"Really?" sneered Regulus, looking around cautiously. No one was around.

Barty shrugged his shoulders. "This is where the view is best." He leaned against the railing, looking down at the Thames. Regulus folded his arms, but finally sighed again and stood beside him.

"What is this?" he asked.

Barty gave him a sidelong glance. "Thought you needed some space. You haven't left Grimmauld Place much in the last few weeks." He looked off into the distance. "It always helps me when I'm here."

"Nice idea, Barty, but this is the worst possible time to do it."

"Why, because you killed a mudblood?"

Hearing that word caught him off guard. Eyes wide, he stared at him. "Y..yeah, I mean..."

"Was your first, wasn't it?" Barty tilted his head. "Yeah, that's always tough. But hey, we're doing the right thing. It's better if we remove

that dirt as soon as possible."

Those words made Barty look so ugly, so wrong, that Regulus had to avert his eyes. A few years ago, he would have agreed with him fervently, would have high-fived him and sung his praises to Voldemort. But he had changed. And it pained him that Barty hadn't followed him.

He didn't want to say another word about it, so he looked down again, at the surface of the water reflecting the light from the bridge.

"I didn't know you..." He clasped his hands together, " were so good at dealing with such ...uh... situations."

"You mean panic attacks?"

Regulus nodded. "It helped...even if the slap wasn't necessary."

Barty laughed. "Yeah, but it did its job, didn't it? Don't be a wimp."

"Yeah yeah." Regulus continued to look at him questioning.

Barty finally shrugged. "My mother. You know how she is."

Frowning, he looked at Barty, but he avoided his gaze. "You know...panic attacks and stuff. She has them all the time."

"Oh, I see," Regulus said, trying to sound empathetic. "I didn't know that."

Barty waved it off. "It's no big deal, don't worry about it, haha."

"Okay." Regulus didn't press him further. Sometimes it was scary how little they actually knew each other. They had shared a dorm room at Hogwarts, been friends for years. How many more secrets did they keep from each other?

"I think the five minutes are almost up," Barty said, nudging Regulus chummily.

Regulus looked at him pityingly. He had always thought he was the one who was emotionally crippled and couldn't show weakness. But apparently there was someone else who deserved that crown.

"You're right." He took one last look at the Thames. Barty had been right; looking at the river had made him feel calmer. But still, it was better if he got out of this bizarre, peaceful situation. He didn't

deserve peace. What he deserved was chaos, havoc, destruction.

"Thank you, for everything," he said anyway, because he was truly grateful.

"Sure, always," Barty replied lightly, his eyes focused on the many lights that illuminated London.

Regulus pressed his lips together and disapparated.

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The rest of the night was bad. He didn't have another panic attack, but the feeling of suffocation still didn't go away.

True, he had finally made a good impression, on Lestrange, on Voldemort, just as his mother had wanted. But at what cost? He would never be able to get rid of the children's screaming. How would he ever find sleep again? How would he ever look at himself in the mirror again? Theobald Dowson had done nothing wrong. Had certainly been a good father and husband, maybe even a good wizard, despite his descent.

How was he ever going to look *James* in the eye again? If he ever found out, he would despise him. He would look at him, heartbroken, with tears in his eyes, as he had done that one, last, cursed night. He wouldn't get through it a second time.

Don't be ridiculous, the ugly voice inside him mocked. *As if you'd ever see him again. He's given you up. He's much happier without you.*

I know, he answered. Because he did. And because it was okay that way. It was exactly what he had always wanted for James. A life with someone who was worthy of him. Who didn't drag him down, who didn't dim his light. Now, finally, everything was as it always should have been.

He did not sleep. At dawn he dragged himself to the bathroom and did what he had doubted for hours before: looked at himself in the mirror. His matted hair, his face that resembled a skull more than ever, his

gray, empty eyes.

And between all the self-hatred, all the guilt, a thought made its way through, made room for itself, soon filled him completely. He clutched the sink with both hands, leaned forward, stared into his own eyes. A strange, defiant determination took possession of him.

Things couldn't go on like this. He couldn't go on like this.

Something had to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Poem from the beginning is by Bertolt Brecht from 1950. (Bertolt Brecht is one of my favorite poets/playwrights! So you'll probably see some more of him in future chapters. :))

In case I didn't already mention it: Regulus is/will be a very important character in this fic! So the chapters from his perspective will return :)

See ya !

Chapter 10: Lose Yourself

Chapter Notes

CW Emotional Manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lights up, steady gaze

In white light, it's all the same

So much transient shit

All the good people become bad

Or have been for a while

I'm here for you, yes, I'm here for you

The days after returning from the hospital were exhausting. Sirius swarmed around him like a satellite, always within reach, but still at a distance, as if he could break otherwise. It annoyed Remus, all this caring. He could hardly investigate like that, not even proper thinking was possible, with that worried look on him all the time. He did everything he could to get Sirius away, smiled until his cheeks hurt, even assured him without being asked that he was fine, that things were getting better and better. At first, Sirius just smiled, as if he didn't believe a word he said, and carried on as before. But eventually, after a few days, his efforts finally seemed to come to fruition.

"I'm going to run some errands, do you want me to bring you anything?"

Remus smiled sweetly, relief flooding through him. "No, thanks. Have fun."

Sirius nodded, hesitating for a moment. "If something's go-"

"Thanks, but I think I'll be fine," Remus interrupted him, trying to exude as much confidence as he could.

Sirius nodded again, reluctantly. "Well, okay. I'll see you later then."

Remus didn't look after him, his mind already on his house search. As soon as the door slammed shut, he got up and roamed the living room, ripping open every closet door, digging through the documents, through every magazine, to find anything useful. While he did find out a few things about Sirius (for example, that he seemed to have a fondness for Muggle sports and music magazines and apparently liked to draw), he found no trace of Remus, nothing at all. He couldn't have been living here for very long. Sirius' room was no better, even though there was more than enough stuff lying around. Everything screamed Sirius, his preferences, his quirks. But who was Remus Lupin?

He hoped that at least his own room could offer him more answers. Even there, Remus hadn't been able to shake Sirius' hypersensitivity the days before, and so far hadn't lost more than a few glances at his belongings. But now, at last, the time had come. He roamed the room like a cat in search of prey.

On the desk, under a thick book, he discovered a half-empty pack of cigarettes and finally knew where the constant scratching in his throat and inner restlessness came from. He pocketed it and decided to light one later.

He continued to look around, his eyes quickly falling on the opulent bookshelf, which was crammed to the brim with yellowing books and even more records. Most were literary classics, oddly enough Remus remembered the contents of most of them as he read their names on the spines. It was the same with all the things he had learned in school: the abstract information, the countless spells and the worthless dates from History of Magic, were all still there, neatly filed away in Remus' memory. But everything he had experienced, and all the people in his life, had been completely erased. It was strange. Most of the bands and performers on the records also rang a bell, but he couldn't remember if he liked them or not.

His eyes fell on the childish posters hanging on the wall next to the shelf. They must have been his favorite bands, the Rolling Stones, Black Sabbath and... a guy with eyeliner and a perm. Remus frowned at them and finally turned away shaking his head.

He rummaged through his closet next, finding a surprising number of

knitted sweaters in muted colors and some washed-out band shirts. Sighing, he turned to the dresser, pulled on the top drawer, and the next moment had the entire front panel in his hand. The bottom of the drawer slid out of its frame and slammed down on Remus' right foot.

"Fuck!" he cursed, staring angrily at the completely tilted dresser. "What fucking misconstruction is that?" Pissed off, he pulled out his wand and fixed it. A few seconds later it was at least standing neatly, but he still didn't find much content of value to him in it. Increasingly frustrated, he rummaged through the nightstand box next, found Remus' current reading, 'Cat's Cradle' by Kurt Vonnegurt, with a crumpled piece of paper stuck in as a bookmark about halfway through, and tossed the book carelessly onto the bed. Was there nothing here at all to help him along? Not even a few silly photos?

In fact, Remus found a Kodak Pocket Instamatic 110 in the bottom drawer shortly thereafter, a small, handy camera, but still no trace of any pictures of his family or friends. He looked at the pocket camera, turned it in his hands, and saw that a film was already loaded. Maybe there were already pictures on the film? Maybe he should have it developed. It was a shot in the dark, but he grasped at any straw.

Remus was about to slide the bottom drawer shut again and abandon his research when he found a small leather-bound book in the far corner that seemed to almost melt into the bottom of the drawer. He pulled it out, looking at it seachingly. It looked worn, had a little water damage on the bottom page, and the pages were curling slightly. There was no title on the front or the spine. Remus opened it. The first page was almost blank, yellowed, featureless. Only in the bottom corner, hair's breadth from the water damage, was written in almost illegible, scrawly letters:

Remus J. Lupin, Diary.

Remus's eyes grew wide. Hastily, he sat down on his bed and continued to browse through. The first entry was dated September 1, 1971.

So, Mom gave me this book, said it would 'help colect thoughts' or someting. Don't know about that yet, but at least I can say I tried.

Yeah, so

First day at Hogwarts.

Got sorted into Gryfindor. Everything is very red here. Sharing my dorm with some posh boys, but they seem okay. Have to send Dad an owl tomorrow, he was mad nervous about all of this. Met Madam Pomfray, too. She's nice. She knows about my probem, but she didn't seem to mind. First time.

His handwriting was so messy that Remus' head already hurt after the first entry. But this was still the jackpot. He forced himself to read the next entry:

September 12, 1971

Skipped a few days, but there was a lot going on. Had my first classes and got to know my teachers. Mcgonagal is my house teacher, she teaches 'transformation' , very confusing stuff. 'Charms' is my favorite so far, think I'll like this one a lot.

Also had my first bad night a few days ago. It was terible, hate that shack already. But Madame Pomfraey was really kind. Made it easier.

And those boys in my dorm are really a handful. James is very loud. Have to go to the library if I want to get any homework done. This other boy, Sirius (very strange name), has been quiet, even heard him crying a few times at night. I think it's because of his family, bad stuff. Hope he'll get better. I like Peter the most so far. He's very shy, but I don't really mind. He's the most normal of us. I better stick to those kinds of people. 'Laying low' as my father would call it. I'm trying my best, dad.

Remus put the diary aside and rubbed his eyes. How the hell had he ever passed even one exam with a handwriting like that? Even he couldn't read it properly, and it was *his own*.

But at least those few lines had already contained some valuable information: Overprotective father, he and his friends in Gryffindor, sharing a dormitory, Sirius' difficult family circumstances. He flipped forward a few pages. The frequency of the entries did not change, as might be expected; there was only one entry every few days. Purely from the amount of text, it probably wouldn't take him a day, but this handwriting would drive him one hundred percent insane in the process.

He tortured himself through two more entries, mainly about different subjects and their difficulties, before he closed the diary annoyed and reached for his cigarette pack.

The cigarette already between his lips, he descended the squeaky stairs and slid his feet lazily into his worn-out shoes without putting them on all the way. He opened the front door expecting a cold breeze, but it was surprisingly mild. Maybe spring was coming this year after all.

He lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply. It felt familiar, the nicotine instantly calming him. It helped him think about his next steps. *Keep covered, wait for the dust to settle, then make contact*, that's what Voldemort had said. How long would that take? And how was he going to keep that connection a secret if he and Sirius were living together? He would notice the messages and absences sooner or later. Remus flicked the ashes on the floor. Already this guy was annoying him.

A load *crack* startled him out of his thoughts.

"Oi, I'm gone for a minute and you're already falling for old habits again," Sirius greeted him with a grin and joined him on the small porch. Remus eyed him for a moment. He looked noticeably more cheerful than before, his eyes shining with amusement and a black bag hanging over his shoulder.

"And what are you doing smoking here anyway and not on my balcony? Suddenly getting scared of heights?"

Remus shrugged. "I couldn't find my climbing gear that I would have needed to overcome the piles of clothes in your room."

Sirius stuck out his tongue and patted him on the shoulder. "Oh, come on."

"You really should clean up."

Sirius nodded theatrically. "I'll do it later, Mum, don't worry." He turned in and presented him the large tote bag. "But first, I want to show you something else!"

Remus took one last drag and stubbed out the cigarette. "What is it?"

"Come along, this needs a proper welcome."

"You don't have a new pet in there or anything, do you?"

Sirius held the door open for him, "One is enough," he replied, winking. Remus tried not to look too confused.

Sirius walked briskly through the living room and placed the bag on the sprawling dinner table in the back. Gingerly, he opened it and reached far inside, farther than anyone should be able to, given the size of the bag. Remus had a bad feeling.

The premonition was confirmed when Sirius pulled a large suitcase out of his pocket, which had a suspicious, very suspicious shape. He turned around, beaming with delight, and held it out to Remus like a small child holds out a self-drawn picture to his parents.

"What's that?" asked Remus confusedly, even though the shape of the suitcase gave little room for speculation.

"This, my dearest Moony", he said cockily, placing the case on the table, undoing the buckles on the side to reveal a brand new electric guitar with a mahogany-colored body. "It's a Gibson Les Paul." Enamored, Sirius looked at it and gently lifted it out of the case.

Remus looked at the guitar with moderate interest. "Someone's been splashing out on this one."

Sirius shook his head, caught. "Let's not talk about it, please." He stroked the dark guitar neck gently. "But I just had to buy it." Sirius looked at Remus with a smile. "If anyone understands that, it's you."

His record collection actually suggested that. He adjusted his response, approaching the guitar reverently and plucking lightly at the top string. "It really is amazing."

"Yes," Sirius said, languishing at it for a moment. Then he carefully placed it back in the case. "It's going to get very noisy here over the next few weeks."

Remus smiled. "Let's see how long I can last without wringing your neck." He was serious, but Sirius just laughed.

"Watch out, you're looking at the new Jimi Hendrix. Give me a few days and you'll pay me to serenade you."

"Wow, Sirius 'Modesty' Black is at it again."

Sirius laughed exuberantly, putting an arm around Remus and hugging him briefly. He seemed happy, much happier than the days before. Remus eyed him searchingly. Sirius returned the look, and for a moment there was silence. Then, all at once unexpectedly serious, Sirius pulled him into a proper hug and rested his head on Remus' shoulder. His black curls tickled Remus' neck.

"I'm glad you're feeling better."

Remus stroked his back reluctantly. "Me too."

Sirius lifted his head and looked at him urgently, his face very close.

"Please tell me if you're not feeling well. You don't have to go through this alone, okay? I'm here for you."

"I know you are," Remus replied, quietly, adjusting to the change in mood between them. He watched Sirius, noting how his gaze briefly drifted to his lips before he almost imperceptibly jerked up and released the embrace.

"All right, then," he whispered, his cheeks slightly flushed.

Remus stifled a laugh. He could read this guy like a book already. This was his signal. The old Remus probably wouldn't have dared to do this, but he wasn't around anymore. Inwardly, he took one deep breath before taking a step forward and kissing Sirius eagerly. As if he had been waiting for it, Sirius returned the kiss immediately and clawed at Remus' shirt.

This was nothing like the little peck in the hospital. Remus soon had one hand in Sirius' hair, the other under his shirt, pressing him closer. Sirius sighed, melting into his touch. Remus had lost all memory of kissing, but with Sirius it seemed playfully easy. He pulled Remus with him, parting his lips, taking the lead. Their kiss quickly evolved into a fierce make-out, and Remus followed their rhythm, pushing Sirius against the dining room table, lifting him slightly and sitting him on it so that he was standing between his legs. Sirius went with it,

wrapping his legs around Remus's hips and kissing him further, and further, until Remus was getting dizzy. He couldn't deny that his body was responding to Sirius. He might be a dirty blood traitor, but he knew what he was doing.

When Sirius finally, after several minutes (or hours, Remus wasn't sure) broke the kiss, it drew an unwilling grumble from Remus. Sirius backed away just a few inches, rested his forehead against his, and looked deep into his eyes.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," he breathed, his lips red and slightly swollen.

"Why not?" retorted Remus, earning a soft laugh.

"Don't make it so hard for me."

Remus sighed reluctantly before eventually breaking away from Sirius and smoothing his shirt back down. Sirius, no less disheveled, pushed himself down from the table and ran a hand through his hair.

"I hope that's not too...", Sirius began, his cheeks still flushed.

"It's all good." Remus smiled indulgently. "I know what you're trying to say. It's all right. It's not going too fast for me, on the contrary." He kissed Sirius on the forehead. "It's actually helping me. With everything. Gives me something else to think about. Something nicer."

Sirius smiled at him, his gaze all warm and soft. Remus averted his eyes before his features slipped. This was a bit too much of a good thing for him, after all.

Sirius brought his guitar upstairs and actually cleaned up his room, while Remus cooked them something for dinner. The rest of the evening they didn't talk much, Sirius thinking about which song he wanted to learn first on the guitar and Remus already mentally preparing himself for the next cryptic diary entries. When they finally went to bed late at night, Sirius gave him a quick, tender kiss, his hand resting at the side of his face.

"See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," Remus murmured.

"I switched my night shift with Alice for tomorrow, by the way. So I can be with you."

"Oh okay," Remus said irritably. "But you didn't have to. I'll be fine on m..."

Sirius smiled indulgently at him, as if he were an obtuse child.

"Moony, tomorrow's full moon."

Oh.

***

December 21, 1971

This diary is supposed to be for Hogwarts only, but I really need to vent. I've been back home since yesterday. It. is. exhausting. Especially dad. I told him about my new friends. He wasn't happy about Sirius at all. My dad hates the Blacks, thinks they're dangerous for someone like me. And he just doesn't want to understand that Sirius is different. He just won't listen. He never does. And mom stays out of all the magic shit anyway. Takes the easy way out, like always.

I'm sick of Christmas, I want to go back to Hogwarts.

***

Remus was nervous, he couldn't deny that. Sirius' act, his pragmatic, routine manner, didn't help him either. He was no longer the Remus who had been a werewolf for several years, who knew what to expect and could mentally adjust to it. This was his first time. As a bloody werewolf, for fuck's sake. There was no way this was going to work out.

It was a balancing act to seem natural as evening slowly fell. The fact that his body was already starting to tingle and his joints ached uncomfortably didn't make it any easier. He already suspected that he couldn't just turn here in the apartment, they didn't even have a

basement. But where would they go then? To the ministry? Was he even a registered werewolf? Or was it going somewhere else entirely?

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Sirius put on a sweater and a second pair of socks. Would they be outside? He looked down at himself, wondering if he was dressed warm enough. Did it even make a difference? He'd be spending much of the night as a damn werewolf anyway. He suppressed an annoyed groan and decided not to bother.

"Are you done?", Sirius asked him at one point, his hair tied back and a blanket under his arm. Remus, in the meantime, had sat down on the couch, exhausted, and closed his eyes.

Yeah, absolutely, Remus thought, wiping inexplicable sweat from his brow. He stood up and followed Sirius out of the living room.

"It's supposed to stay dry tonight," Sirius said as he put on his coat, scarf, and cap. Remus nodded and, after a moment's hesitation, did likewise. As they stepped outside, realization hit Remus and he froze. Surely they would apparate. But where to? Remus didn't have a clue. If Sirius just disappeared now, where would he...?

"Are you all right?" asked Sirius, touching him gently on the upper arm.

"Uh." Remus swallowed. "Could you maybe give me a hand? I'm feeling a little unsteady."

"Oh, that bad already?" Sirius looked at him with concern. "But sure, take my hand."

Remus took a deep breath, actually enjoying the awful feeling of apparating this time.

They landed in the middle of a forest, at the edge of a small clearing bathed in warm orange from the evening sun. Remus took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his forehead again. You would have thought he had run a marathon. How could anyone sweat like that?

Sirius hadn't let go of his hand, gently leading him towards the clearing, towards a small, abandoned wooden hut. It looked run down, the wood damp and darkened by the weather. The door was closed, but it looked as if a slight breeze was enough to lift it off its hinges.

Sirius pointed his wand at the door. "Alohomora," he whispered, and a clack was heard. The door swung open and Remus was astonished to see the inside of the hut. A large, brown carpet was laid out in front of them, leading them to a large, comfortable-looking couch. To their left was a fireplace that lit itself as they entered, bathing the room in warm light. To the right, Remus spotted a small bathroom area, with a sink and a half-open cabinet full of medical supplies. He discovered plasters of all sizes, corked potions, bandages, and even some tourniquets in there. Someone was prepared here.

"Wow," Remus slipped out and he bit his lower lip.

"Oh, Moony, don't always act like that," Sirius retorted, elbowing Remus in the side. "I've told you enough times that you've outdone yourself here, you don't have to rub it in my face every time."

I fixed all this up? He wanted to ask in amazement, but he refrained from doing so this time. Instead, he smiled, albeit a bit pained.

"Do you need anything? Something to drink? We still have a little time left."

"No, I just...want to rest," Remus said, which was true. The couch looked so inviting that he walked straight to it and let himself sink into the soft cushion. He dropped his head back on the backrest and closed his eyes, trying to ignore the throbbing in his head. A little later, he felt the cushion lower beside him again. He opened one eye and recognized Sirius, who was watching him warily, as if unsure of what to do next.

You should leave soon, if you value your life, he wanted to say, but kept quiet. There wasn't a moment near Remus that Sirius wasn't in danger. He just wasn't aware of that yet.

After Sirius seemed to have weighed carefully, he carefully slid closer to him and grasped Remus' hand. Remus released his grip again and instead put an arm around Sirius to squeeze him closer, even though the touch made him uncomfortable on several levels.

"Tell me something," Remus said, because he could really use a distraction. He was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm.

Sirius seemed to consider, leaning his head against Remus' shoulder and looking past him into the fire. "I can tell you a bit about the Order meeting today, we haven't talked about that yet. Probably won't lift your spirits, though."

"That's not a bad thing, I'm happy for any distraction." If it was valuable information about the Order, all the better. He just hoped he didn't forget any of it in his current state.

Sirius sighed, "So, I guess there was another attack a few days ago."

"Oh no, who did it hit?"

"Theobald Dowson. He was on our list, after all, but we had rated him much less of a threat than, say, Roberts or Brown. So we didn't have guards at his house."

He desperately needed to find that list.

"And what exactly happened to him?" he asked a little hoarsely, taking off his scarf and cap with his free hand.

Sirius gave him some space. "According to his wife, there were at least three Death Eaters. They blew the door open at night and trapped her upstairs in the bedroom. She was hit by a shock spell and was unconscious when it happened. But I guess the kids had to watch the whole thing."

That's their problem, Remus thought coldly, unzipping his jacket.

"Come on, take it off," Sirius said, probably feeling Remus' hot flashes all the way to him. "You're dressed way too warm today anyway. Were you afraid of a sudden blizzard?"

"You never know," Remus tried to joke, but a sharp pain in his back froze the smile on his face. Hastily, he put his jacket aside and took his sweater off right away. But even in a T-shirt he was still too warm.

Without further comment, Sirius extinguished the fire with a wave of his wand. Then, with a second wave, Sirius opened the door to the cottage. Cold air poured in, drawing the heat outside and bringing Remus noticeable relief. He sighed.

"At the meeting, we then talked about how to avoid something like that in the future," Sirius picked up the topic again.

"And what was decided?" asked Remus, trying to look casually interested.

Sirius shivered as a particularly cold breeze passed through the cabin. "We need more members, then we can cover more ground. Last time,

Moody had already announced potential newcomers. Two of them will probably be joining us starting next week."

"And who are they?" Remus's voice sounded rough.

"Edgar Bones and Mary Macdonald."

"Ah, okay, that ..." Remus suppressed a pained groan and felt Sirius gently pat his arm.

"Yes, I think by the next meeting you'll be fit enough too, then you can make up your own mind."

"Yeah," Remus said chokingly, having increasing trouble maintaining his composure. It *hurt*.

"Come on, Moony, lie down," Sirius said, getting up to make room for him. Remus obeyed, taking off his shoes erratically and putting his feet up. His muscles contracted uncomfortably, feeling as if they were about to go into the biggest cramp in human history. His breath hitched.

"If you want, I'll just keep talking," Sirius offered, and Remus nodded it off effusively. Even though he was probably no longer able to listen reasonably.

"Then we talked some more about a possible method for spy detection. Moody and Doge want to introduce it soon."

That set alarm bells ringing in Remus' head, but he couldn't bring himself to ask further. He would have to deal with that tomorrow. If he was going to survive the night, of which he wasn't convinced yet.

Sirius kept talking, eventually only about trivia, about his glorious first guitar attempts, and about the Van Halen record Remus had randomly selected and put on today. Remus gasped meanwhile, moaned, squirmed in pain at some point. It couldn't last much longer. So why didn't Sirius disappear?

"What are you doing? What are you... waiting for?...", Remus brought out with difficulty and Sirius interrupted him immediately.

"Is it time?"

You stupid idiot, what does it look like?!, he wanted to shout, but his voice failed him. He howled, feeling as if his bones were about to

break. At first he didn't even register it, too busy with his agony. But then he glanced hurriedly at the spot where Sirius had just been standing, and instead saw a huge black dog in the middle of a pile of clothes. And although his head was about to burst, strangely enough, he immediately understood what it meant.

He could be glad that at that moment his transformation kicked in, because there was no way he could have controlled his reaction, no way he could have kept his mouth shut. Sirius Black was a fucking animagus? What was next, was James a fucking vampire? Peter a half-...

His thoughts died with his mind.

It wasn't like he wasn't noticing anything at all. He saw and heard certain things, felt them, perceived them, but it was all like through a thick veil. He wasn't thinking, just following instinct, feeling free as he had never before. And he felt that he was not alone, there was someone by his side, keeping him company. It felt good. The werewolf felt at ease.

When it was finally morning and Remus awoke, though, *he* felt anything but comfortable. His body was suddenly 80 years old and had fallen down a staircase. Not an inch of him didn't ache. It took a while for the veil before his eyes to clear, for him to remember who and where he was. He was lying on the couch, covered up to his neck with a soft blanket, the fire in the fireplace was burning again. Behind him, he heard the faucet being turned on. Cautiously, he looked around and caught sight of Sirius washing his hands. His fingertips were bloody.

"Are you all right?" asked Remus, his voice sounding pathetic. Sirius looked at him and laughed. "You're asking me that?" He walked up to Remus and squatted down at his head level. "It's all good. Took care of your wounds, but it wasn't much this time." He brushed a strand of hair from Remus' face and kissed him on the forehead.

"Thanks," Remus murmured, closing his eyes again. He would never be

able to stand up again, every single bone in his body had to be broken.

For a while Sirius let him doze like that, then he gently ran his hand through his hair. "We should get back. You should get into a real bed." He paused for a moment. "And then I can get some rest, too."

Remus forced his eyes to open and nodded. "Almost ready."

That 'almost' turned out to be another half hour, which Sirius endured in silence with deep bags under his eyes, even helping him dress and disapparate. Remus tried to pull himself together, but had to be supported by Sirius, all the way to his room. When Remus finally lay in his bed, they were both heavily out of breath.

"Thanks," Remus gasped again, unable to do more than that. He still had his clothes on, but he didn't care.

"No problem," Sirius mumbled exhaustedly and made his way to his room without much fuss. "Get a good rest," he dropped in before letting the door slam shut.

"Mhh," Remus managed before he fell asleep, finally relieved of the sickening pain.

And he was supposed to endure this every month now?

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Verlier dich/Lose yourself' by Provinz (So, title song for a random chapter? Hell yeah! We love to see it! Also: Provinz is my favorite band. All their songs just radiate pure, raw emotion, I get goosebumps everytime)

Loved writing this chapter! I'm a sucker for those 'domestic' chapters, I just wish the circumstances were different T.T Yes I just used that emoticon, welcome back tumblr 2009.

Hope you liked it!
<3

See ya!

Chapter 11: Don't Be Afraid

Chapter Notes

CW Drinking; Emotional Manipulation; Sexual Content (towards the end of the chapter. If you don't want to read that: skip the part between the words 'irrevocably' and 'Holy', They are written in bold letters and underlined, so you can easily track them.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I feel the way I feel

'cause I don't feel anything anymore

These walls are getting closer

Feel the way I feel

'cause I don't feel anything anymore

Can anybody hear me?

March 3, 1972

It was James' idea. Just to be clear. He's always coming up with shit like this. The problem is that Sirius thinks everything James suggests is great. And together they can be very convincing. Peter and I basically had no choice but to go along with it.

A prank. Just a little one, actually. We enchanted the benches from the Slytherin table in the Great Hall, just before dinner. When a Slytherin sat on it, the bench made farting noises, it was hilarious. Apparently the four of us found that a bit too funny, because they figured out quickly that it was us. Told Slughorn all about it and now we've got a week's detention. Really stupid. And they swore revenge on us, stupid idiots. Let them come!

***

Reading the diary while Sirius was trying to learn his first chords in

his room was twice as awful. Every few seconds he seriously considered using a Silencing Charm, but he didn't like the thought of not hearing anyone coming. He couldn't risk Sirius showing up in his room while he didn't control himself. So he endured the off-key sounds and the half-smudged, barely legible writing at the same time, and after a few minutes he felt like his head was going to burst. Time for a smoke.

He considered just walking back out the front door to avoid Sirius, but finally decided against it. It wasn't like him to smoke downstairs. No creating unnecessary bewilderment.

Sirius was in the mode. Bent low over his guitar, he stuck his tongue out, seemingly trying to grasp a particularly tricky chord. His fingers resembled one of those complicated sailor's knots.

"That doesn't look very healthy," Remus commented, climbing over Sirius' heap of clothes to cross the room.

"Shut up, Moony, I need to concentrate."

"Don't mind me," Remus pushed open the door to the balcony and felt the fresh air on his skin. Carefully, he stretched his legs, which still ached slightly from the transformation. The healing had progressed faster than expected. If he had been asked how he was doing just a day ago, he would have announced theatrically that his testament was almost done, but now he was nearly fit again. This whole werewolf thing was just confusing.

It wasn't a minute before Sirius gave up and joined him on the balcony.

"Can I have one?"

Remus wordlessly handed him his last cigarette.

"No Jimi Hendrix after all?" he asked innocently.

"Just you wait, fucking idiot," Sirius muttered, leaning back in his chair. Remus bit his tongue.

They smoked in silence for a while, before Sirius eventually sighed, slightly leaning towards him.

"What I wanted to ask," he began hesitantly. "Well you know me, I usually always do things like this in secret, but because things are... a

little different this year" He gave him a somewhat awkward smile. "Thought I'd better ask you."

"What's it about?"

"Your birthday. Day after tomorrow."

Oh.

"What about it?"

"Well, we've always celebrated it big so far... At Hogwarts, anyway. And so I thought we should continue that." Sirius took a deep drag and blew the smoke into the wind. "If you feel like it, of course."

Remus shrugged. "Sure, why not. Always been fun so far."

Sirius smirked, honestly this time. "Oh, yeah." He looked relieved. "Who should I invite, then?"

Remus flicked ashes across the balcony busily. "Oh you know, the usual."

"You'll have to be a little more specific, Moony. How many people were there at your 18th? 40?"

Remus laughed, a little awkwardly. "Something like that."

"Tell me, I'll take care of it."

"Do they all even have time on such short notice?"

"Sure, we've all been sitting at home sadly for weeks anyway, hoping to survive our next shift."

"Hmm," Remus moistened his lips. "Well, James, Lily, and Peter definitely."

"You don't say."

The ice was getting thin. "Marlene," he managed to get out and then stood there blankly. What other people did he know? He wasn't far enough along in the diary; his almost 12-year-old self didn't even know Lily yet.

Sirius interpreted his silence as finality. Somewhat indignantly, he looked at him. "Not Mary?"

"Yeah, of course, sorry." Remus indicated a smack against his forehead. Was he talking about that Mary Macdonald? The one who was now joining the Order?

"No one else?" Sirius frowned and Remus tried what he hoped was a pitiful smile.

"Well, I think otherwise it will be a bit too much for me to deal with. I'd rather stick to just the ones I feel one hundred percent safe with."

He seemed to accept that, thank goodness. "You please tell me right away if it gets too much at any point, okay? They'll understand that, too."

"Do they actually know?" asked Remus cautiously. "What exactly happened." A shadow returned to Sirius' face, one he had carried with him constantly at St. Mungos, and one that had been slow to leave him over the past few days. He nodded, his mouth a thin line. "I told them. Not in detail, of course; that's not my place. But I thought that they should know."

Remus nodded affirmatively. "Thanks, that was definitely the right thing to do." He was just glad he didn't have to talk about that pesky story again. But just bringing it up seemed to have spoiled Sirius' mood.

"Sirius, don't look like that. It's all good."

"I told you I hate it when you lie."

Oh, honey. Not a single word out of my mouth is the truth.

"Sorry."

Sirius tossed his cigarette and crossed his arms. "I know how it is."

Good for you.

"You mean torture?"

Sirius avoided his gaze. "Yes. I've been through it long enough at home. For every little trivial thing, I was punished like that. It was hell."

When did he break with his family?

"But you put an end to that."

Sirius's fingers clawed at his jeans. "Took me long enough."

"But it's over now. You've managed to put it behind you. So help me do the same, step by step."

There was regret in his gaze now. "You never put something like that behind you, ever. You learn to live with it, but you're never the same. Part of you stays there forever."

Or all of it.

Remus tossed his cigarette butt away. "I don't think so. You're not what happens to you. You're not less because you've been hurt. You are you. You will always be you. And everything that seems lost will eventually come back."

Sirius' eyes widened, staring at him.

"At least, that's what I want to believe. Otherwise, I might as well give up." Remus didn't know where those words came from, but they seemed to have the desired effect. He saw tears swimming in Sirius' eyes for a moment before he hastily blinked them away.

"I want to believe that, too."

Remus leaned forward and patted Sirius' arm, a reassuring smile on his lips. "Good. Then let's just try to live as if we never suffered."

Sirius grabbed Remus' face and kissed him tenderly. This was the kind of kiss Remus couldn't stand. He could go along with the stormy, greedy ones, because he shared the desire in them. But with the feathery, meaningful ones, the ones full of small, silent declarations of love, he couldn't. They only awakened the urge to push him away.

After a few seconds, Sirius released the kiss and looked deep into his eyes, a thousand silent words in his gaze. "Please, don't ever leave me," he whispered, his lips inches from Remus'. He sounded vulnerable, showing him everything of himself, his whole soul, in just five words.

"Never," Remus replied, sealing their lips again.

The next lie.

***

March 10, 1972

They remembered my birthday. James, Sirius and Peter. They even gave me a present, a Muggle book, 'Then Again, Maybe I Won't', it' s called. I don't know how they got it, they don't know anything about Muggle stuff.

I'm going to start this book right away today. I think it's going to be my new favorite. Totally don't care what happens in it. It's perfect.

***

"MOONY!" shouted James with such vigor that for a moment Remus felt like a long-lost family member. He stood outside the front door, dressed thickly, the strap of a cloth bag jammed into the crook of his elbow, from which it rattled suspiciously. Beside him, wrapped even more thickly, stood Lily, rolling her eyes.

"James!" retorted Remus, trying to imitate his exuberant tone. He hugged James and smiled meaningfully at Lily over his shoulder. She just smirked.

"Uh, Prongs, you notice something?" commented Sirius behind him, putting on his typical sarcastic tone. "He calls you James now. He doesn't use my nickname anymore either. He's all grown up now."

James sighed theatrically and let go of Remus again. "I knew we'd lose him eventually," he said in Sirius' direction.

"I'm going to miss him," Sirius sobbed, and Remus knew what face he was making even without looking. "He was way too young to grow up."

"I'm nineteen," Remus commented dryly.

"Oh!" James put the back of his hand to his forehead like a maiden about to faint. "Way too young!"

"James," Lily said exasperatedly, pushing him aside with her elbow. "Sorry, they're unbearable again." She hugged Remus warmly. "Happy birthday, Remus."

"Oh, right, there was that," James commented. "Happy birthday, Moony."

"Thanks, James." What kind of stupid nickname was prongs, anyway? Didn't fit James at all.

"Come on, my last remaining youthful friend," Sirius said, holding out his hand to James. "Let me take off your heavy bag, it's hard to watch."

James grinned and handed him the bag, which apparently contained a lot of glass. This could be an interesting evening.

"Are we the first?" asked Lily, peering into the living room.

"Yep, Peter said he'd be a little late, got some work to do at the Ministry. But Mary and Marlene should be here any minute."

"Yeah yeah," James quipped. "Knowing Mary, I'm sure she's still on the couch taking naps."

Lily looked at him meaningfully. "Don't act like I didn't have to drag you out of bed myself fifteen minutes ago."

Sirius, over at the dining room table where he was lining up alcohol like a trophy collection, laughed out loud.

"Honey, you can't stab me in the back like that!" exclaimed James indignantly.

"Oh, can't I?" said Lily, looking at Remus with raised eyebrows. She expressed a lot with her eyes, carrying out entire conversations in the blink of an eye. Remus seemed to be the frequent recipient of those looks, and he had to be careful to follow behind.

"So, while we're waiting for the others, we shouldn't be left high and dry, should we?" exclaimed Sirius, conjuring four glasses on the table. "Who wants firewhiskey?"

***

Remus spent the first part of the evening observing. He tried to understand their group dynamics, their relationships with each other

and especially their relationship with Remus. The first clue was the greeting of the stragglers, it already told him that Mary was enthusiastic and bright, that Marlene covered her honest reunion joy with sarcasm and that Peter's nervousness was not only due to the hospital setting.

They all seemed to be very close friends. Right from the start, they threw around insiders, with Remus laughing a little more reservedly than the rest. After helping themselves to the alcohol (though, to Sirius' regret, none of them took any of the firewhiskey), they all either planted themselves on the couch or pulled up the dining room chairs and sat in a semicircle around it. It wasn't long before Mary pointed to the record player, which stood lonely and silent behind Remus on the shelf of the living room closet.

"What's going on here, Remus? No music? Since when don't you use every spare second to share this excellent Muggle culture with us?

From the way she said it, she certainly had Muggle ancestors. Was she a half-blood like him? Or even worse?

As if he wasn't thinking about the place she would occupy on his enemies list, he smiled at her, caught, and rose.

"How could I forget?" He hadn't brought any records down, so he hurried up the stairs and grabbed a handful at random, hoping his favorites were included. After a quick look at his posters, he also put on a Black Sabbath record, just to be on the safe side.

Already on his way back downstairs, Remus heard James' loud laugh. "Haha, I completely forgot about that!" Arriving in the living room, the others joined in the laughter, but Remus pretended not to notice. It was too risky to ask. He put on *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac, earning enthusiasm from Lily in particular.

"Oh, I love them!" she exclaimed, and Mary excitedly agreed with her. Peter looked at her in confusion. "Are they well-known?"

Mary just shook her head in disbelief. "Sometimes I wonder if you purebloods ever leave the house."

"Hey!" protested Peter, and Mary pinched his side teasingly. "You know how I mean that. But yeah, they're quite famous. And great."

They listened to *Second Hand News* for a while, sipping their drinks. Remus was particularly restrained in his consumption. He probably

couldn't justify not drinking at all on his own birthday, but he'd be damned if he was going to accidentally blurt out any plans while drunk.

"How's it going with you anyway, Mary?" asked James, who had almost finished his first glass. "Haven't seen you in ages, after all."

Mary shrugged and reached for the snacks waiting on the living room table. "Oh, pretty good so far. Actually enrolled in a muggle university and wanted to leave all that shit behind," she gave the others meaningful glances, "But after a few lectures, I realized it wasn't for me. The war was always in the back of my mind. And I felt like I was leaving you guys alone." She grinned, but it didn't reach her eyes. "That's why I joined the Order!"

"I hope you've thought this through," Sirius, of all people, said to her. Remus gave him a sideways glance and saw his serious face. "I'm happy for you to join, but you don't have to do this because of us. It's too dangerous for that."

Mary returned Sirius' gaze, looking determined. "I know. But I still want to."

Silence. Sirius nodded wordlessly at her words and emptied his glass in one big gulp. A second later, he had refilled it to the brim.

James tried to save the tilted mood. "But what should also not be forgotten in this round is the fact that Peter has a new flame!"

"WHAT?" screeched Sirius, his mood completely changed from one second to the next. He spilled some of his mead as he jerked forward, eyes wide. "Peter!" He stared promptly at Peter, who turned bright red and shrank under his gaze.

"Jaaames, I told you I wanted to tell this myself!" he evaded, and James raised his hands in surrender. Lily looked at him sympathetically, but didn't look surprised. Mary and Marlene, on the other hand, also seemed completely flustered. This had to be a big one. Remus leaned forward as well, a surprised face on.

"So tell us, how come?" he asked, watching a small, proud smile steal onto Peter's lips, which immediately faded when Sirius threw a loud " TELL US PETER, I can't believe you told James about this first!" after it.

"Sorry, Padfoot"

Ah, Padfoot. Finally.

"It was just a coincidence. I stayed with James and Lily for a bit after the last Order meeting, and I couldn't keep it to myself!"

"Hmph," Sirius just made offended, crossing his arms and giving Remus a tiny sideways glance. Remus just smiled.

"Ignore the idiot, tell me!" he urged Peter, doing his best to look interested. Not very easy with a topic like this, though.

"Yeah so" Peter began, so excitedly that he immediately muddled his words. "Her name i-is Grace and I met her at work. She works in my department."

"Ah," Marlene sipped her wine, legs crossed, a wise mentor look on her face. "The classic."

Peter shrugged. "I thought she was cute from the start, but I didn't dare approach her. But last week, when I was in her office for a proposal...she took it into her own hands."

Mary shook her head impatiently. "Peeeter, be a little more specific! What did she say? Did she want to go out? Did you guys go on a date?"

Peter's cheeks were pink. "Yeah, well, she asked me if I wanted to go out with her. I said yes."

"And how nervous were you about that?" asked James, amused.

"Don't ask. I almost died."

"And have you had the date yet?" asked Marlene, half in her glass, maintaining her facade of reserve with difficulty.

Peter nodded, proud. "Yeah, a couple of days ago. It was really great."

"Did you guys make out?" asked Sirius directly, Peter's pink cheeks turning bright red abruptly.

"Sirius!" snapped Lily at him sternly. "Why don't you let poor Peter tell it?"

Sirius ignored her words and watched Peter's reaction quite closely. Then, a moment later, he leaned back and grinned with satisfaction. "Wormtail, I'm proud of you."

Remus' gaze shifted confusedly back and forth between Sirius and *Wormtail*. Mary seemed to shift gears a little faster. "So you did!!! On the first date! You rascal!" She nudged him with her elbow and Peter looked so excited and happy that he almost seemed to burst.

"Yeah, well ..." He tried to suppress his grin. "I didn't push it, honestly! But the evening was going really well! And then it just... happened."

Sirius shook his head appreciatively. "Peter, you never cease to amaze me."

Peter shrugged happily. "Yeah, well!"

"And what did she say? Are you meeting again?" Mary's curiosity seemed insatiable. Peter nodded. "Yes, tomorrow already! We want to go out for dinner. I think she really likes me!"

"I'm happy for you," Remus interjected, so at least he had said something. Peter looked at him gratefully. "Thank you, Moony. I'm very happy, too."

Remus felt Sirius' gaze on him and returned it. Sirius still had a small smile on his face, but he saw something else in his eyes as well. Was it ... regret? Before Remus was quite sure, Sirius broke eye contact, leaned back in his chair, and raised his glass in a small toast. "Well, this is really great news. Our little Peter, how far you have come!"

Peter laughed boisterously. "Padfoot, I'm not getting married. I've had one date so far."

"Yep, but that went splendidly, didn't it? A good omen."

"Don't jinx it!"

"I never would," Sirius said, a mischievous look on his face. He really was a mystery to Remus. His moods swung worse than a boat at sea in a storm. There was so much going on behind his eyes, so many nuances, so many details. And Remus just didn't know him well enough anymore to understand them all.

Suddenly Marlene got up from the couch and looked at Remus. "I'm going out for a smoke, want to come?" she asked him, and he nodded, somewhat perplexed. "Uh, sure!" He put down his glass and followed her brisk steps out of the living room.

"So Remus," Marlene said as they both stood on the front porch with

only muffled music and chatter coming from the apartment. "Tell me everything."

Remus watched her puzzled as she lit her cigarette and looked at him like dog looked at a treat.

"Tell you what?" he asked cautiously.

"Don't act Remus!" she said, one eyebrow raised. "I'm not stupid. And you're not very subtle."

Remus still wasn't sure what she was alluding to. There were too many things he was keeping secret right now, she was going to have to be more specific.

"What are you talking about?" he repeated therefore, earning a look from Marlene that screamed 'for real now?'. She shook her head.

"Remus, what's going on with you and Sirius?"

"Oh, uh," Remus felt relief flood through him. Then again, another question arose in him. "Is it that obvious?"

Marlene smiled broadly at him, smoke escaping from her nose. "If one knows you well and is not as dense as James, yes. Very much so."

"Oh, I see." He hated watchful people like that. They only ever brought trouble.

He grinned sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck. "Hmm, so yeah."

"What, 'yeah'? I've had to put up with your pining for a year and a half, so I deserve a little more information!"

So she'd known about it for a while. Was she the only one?

Remus tried to reconstruct the story from Sirius' vague tales. Meanwhile, to buy a little time, he also lit a cigarette.

"Well, a few weeks ago, I just did it. Kissed him."

Marlene's eyes widened. "No way! Just like that? You were always on my case about how you could *never* do that."

Remus shrugged. "Don't ask me, I don't know what got into me. Just kind of came out of the moment."

Marlene shook her head in disbelief. "And how did Sirius react? You really threw him in at the deep end there, didn't you?"

Remus sighed in agreement and took a drag. "Not well. I think it was a bit too much for him." He didn't want to go into too much detail, not to mention that he didn't even know those details.

She looked at him sympathetically. "I'm sorry about that. That must have made you feel terrible."

Oh, don't worry dear, all forgotten already.

Remus nodded. "Thought I'd ruined the friendship now. Sirius was very distant, we barely spoke." At least that's how he imagined it.

"You could have reached out to me! You know I'm always there for you."

"Thank you. But I was just very ... preoccupied with myself."

She pressed her lips into a thin line. "Was that before...?"

Remus nodded again, hearing her hold her breath.

Before she could say anything he patted her arm. "It's all right. It's all turned out fine. I'm back. And I'd barely woken up in the hospital before he was kissing me and apologizing."

"Still, he could have gotten his act together sooner," Marlene said bitterly. "He may have had his reasons, but we can't afford that kind of drama. Not the way things are right now. That could have haunted him for the rest of his life, if something even worse had happened to you."

"Yeah," was all Remus said, letting Marlene brood for a moment. "But you can tell he's sorry. He tried very hard to make it up to me."

A small smile crept onto her face, chasing away her brooding wrinkles. "Oh, did he? How should I understand that?"

Remus felt the need to roll his eyes, but he forced himself back into his excited shyness. "Oh, nothing wild. We're still in the beginning stages," he muttered.

He also hoped it stayed that way for as long as possible. Even though the part of him that found Sirius attractive certainly wouldn't mind, he could gladly do without all the emotional baggage on Sirius' part. It

was too much for him as it was.

Marlene giggled. "Ohhh, someone is going to have a nice birthday!" Her tone did not bode well.

"We'll see," Remus replied, trying to ignore her probing, teasing look. "Please don't tell anyone for now." In the end, he didn't care, but he could imagine Sirius would.

"My lips are sealed," she said, "on one condition, though."

"Which one?"

All at once she looked nervous. "That you keep quiet about what I'm about to tell you."

Remus nodded, interested. Was it secret information about the Order? Something only the innermost circle was allowed to know?

"I'm with Dorcas."

Remus blinked once.

"Oh, Dorcas?" Who was that supposed to be?

She misunderstood his confusion, thankfully. "Yeah, I-I know, it's a bit out of the blue." She said shyly. "I've been thinking about whether to tell anyone for a long time. But I think I feel freer with it if someone knows. And you're the one I trust the most. After all, you're also..."

"Yeah," Remus said. "I am" *Apparently*. And then, realizing his response wasn't enough, he carefully took Marlene's hand and squeezed it affirmatively. "Thank you for trusting me with it. I'm very happy for you. And I won't tell anyone."

He could feel Marlene's hand shaking. Was he really the first person she had come out to? She really had to appreciate him. Jesus, why did these people all like Remus so much? Why did they have to make it so unnecessarily difficult for him?

"Thank you," she said finally, choking up. "Took me a while to accept it. Dorcas helped me a lot with that. The only good thing this damn Order has done me."

So Dorcas was in the Order, too. "Yeah, something has to come of risking our lives every day."

Marlene eagerly agreed with him. "Definitely." She flicked her cigarette butt away and waited for Remus to do the same before pulling him into a fervent hug. "I'm so glad to have you."

Remus returned the hug reluctantly. "Mmm." Was there never an end to this touchy-feely stuff?

"Ohh, sorry to bother you," Remus heard a voice behind him. He broke away from Marlene and caught sight of Sirius standing in the doorway, grinning at them. "Just wanted to see what was taking you so long."

Remus shook his head in annoyance. "That wasn't even ten minutes, Sirius."

Sirius's gaze bore into him. "Yeah, but James can't wait to give you your present. We can't keep him waiting any longer or he'll explode."

"Good, we were just finishing anyway," Marlene said a little uncertainly and walked past Sirius through the door. Remus wanted to follow her, but when he was level with Sirius, he stopped Remus with a hand to his chest.

"What's up?" asked Remus, not understanding what was going on with him now. Sirius eyed him intently, his eyebrows drawn together, his mouth slightly open, as if he wanted to say something. But the only thing that finally crossed his lips was a small "oh, nothing," before he let go of him and let him into the house. Remus shook his head inwardly. Why wasn't he living with someone less complicated like James or Peter?

"*Finally*!" exclaimed James once Remus was back. "Was afraid you'd run off with Marlene for a moment."

"It was ten minutes," Remus repeated, noticing the wrapped present lying on James' lap.

"Way too long," James nodded, directing Remus to sit down. "We want to give you your present now."

"You don't have to give me anything," he replied, but the others just waved it off.

"We've never cared about that and you know it Remus," Lily said with a smile, pointing to said gift. "This is from all of us. We hope you like it."

Hesitantly, he accepted it from James. Everyone looked at him tensely, he didn't like that. The gift was shaped like a big, heavy book and he hoped no surprise awaited him.

Carefully, he opened it, peeled down the wrapping paper, and actually recognized a book of some sort. He turned it in his hand until he held it the right way up and a photograph beamed at him from a small viewing window in the cover. It showed the seven of them, huddled intimately together, in front of a frozen lake. They were dressed warmly, all in Gryffindor uniforms and, thanks to the magic, moving around a bit, laughing boisterously, sporting bunny ears, looking happy. James was in the center, one arm draped over Sirius, the other over Lily, wearing the widest grin of all. Remus stood on the right edge, hooked in with Marlene and smiling a bit more reservedly. Still, he seemed genuinely happy. Remus regarded it thoughtfully for a while.

"This is um," James began cautiously when Remus made no move to open the book. "It's an album. With pictures."

Remus looked up and saw James squirming around. "Sirius, uh, said you were having a little trouble remembering some things. So we thought maybe it would help if we collected some impressions and some nice moments from Hogwarts, for you. Just in case."

Remus looked around, into the wide, eager eyes of his friends, and knew he had to respond convincingly now. "You guys are crazy."

Mary laughed. "You're just noticing this now?"

Remus flipped open the album and browsed through it. On each page he found an enchanted photo featuring him or some of his friends, usually with a short text attached, apparently always written by someone else. At a random page he stopped and looked at it more closely. The picture showed James holding up the Quidditch cup in complete euphoria, his cheeks flushed, his mouth open in a triumphant scream. Next to it was written, *Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor! That was in fifth year. The party was unforgettable. I hope you didn't forget that you swore off firewhiskey forever that night*. Remus was sure that it was written by James. An honest smile stole onto his lips. Jackpot.

"That's... that's absolutely insane," he muttered, as if he couldn't believe it. "Where did you find all those pictures?"

"That was most of the work," Lily said. "As you'll see, we took a few

pictures from your pocket camera via Sirius and tried to add a little magic to them. The rest of the pictures we scrounged up at our places, were more than we thought after all."

"That's..." Remus was pleasantly surprised. His journal was probably a bit more detailed with the events, but it was worth its weight in gold to have all these pictures around for visualization. These fools were far too gullible and far too good to him.

"Amazing?", James completed his sentence and Remus nodded emphatically. He set the album aside and made his rounds, hugging his friends one by one and thanking them profusely.

"This is the best gift you could have given me."

The last thing he did was hug Sirius, holding him a little longer, hoping that it would chase away his strange mood from before. Sirius' gaze, however, was still unreadable. Remus suppressed a sigh. Such a drama queen.

Over the next few hours, their mood became increasingly boisterous. The alcohol went down well and James, Peter, and Mary in particular seemed to be having a very good time. Sirius, too, couldn't keep his fingers off the firewhiskey and at one point was grinning blissfully. He was easier that way.

Remus continued to hold back, as did Lily, who presumably wanted to make sure James returned safely later. At some point, when the music had gotten louder and more energetic and Peter had staggered to open the dance floor behind the couch, Remus, Marlene, and Lily let the others cackle and sat together.

"I'm surprised you're keeping such a low profile today," Lily commented at one point, her cheeks slightly flushed from the wine. "You're usually right up front, aren't you?"

Marlene cleared her throat into her glass. "Must stay fit for later."

Lily frowned. "For what?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "I don't know what she means. I guess someone's alcohol is going to their head."

Marlene agreed with him innocently. "Yeah, it must be that."

They talked for a while, making fun of James and Peter, who were surprisingly similar when drunk. Similarly self-confident and similarly goofy. At one point, after a failed acrobatics routine, they were both on the floor laughing wildly, and Sirius and Mary were snorting so hard they almost went down themselves. It was contagious, at least to Lily and Marlene. Remus played along.

So they continued late into the night, until finally Lily, eyes small and tired, announced that she and James were leaving. James wasn't too thrilled about this at first, but after some convincing, he was finally on board. They all hugged and said their goodbyes.

"We really need to do this more often."

Please don't.

Fortunately, after they had left, it wasn't long before Mary, Peter and Marlene joined them.

"I'll make sure they get home safe and sound," Marlene assured them as she pulled Mary and Peter along.

"Thanks," Remus replied, giving her another hug.

"Have fun," she murmured in his ear before breaking away from him and waving goodbye. Remus' smile was a little pained. One little glance at Sirius, at his piercing, probing gaze, was enough to know that it was probably going to be anything but fun.

After all the guests had left and the soft crackle of the record playing through was the only thing that broke the silence, Remus allowed himself to take a quick breath. He hadn't cut a bad figure, or so he thought. No one had asked him strange things, no one had seemed to find his behavior odd. And he had gotten the photo album, so it hadn't been entirely wasted time.

He began to tidy up the living room, partly waving his wand, but also enjoying taking a few steps himself and carrying the chairs back to the table. At some point, however, he could no longer ignore Sirius's gaze.

"Is something wrong?" he asked cautiously, leaning against the table and crossing his arms. Sirius stood a few steps away, his arms hanging

limply. Why did he look so... skeptical? He was making Remus nervous.

"What do you mean?" replied Sirius tonelessly.

"You've been acting weird all night. Did I do something wrong?"

Sirius hesitated, his cheeks flushed from the alcohol, but his expression surprisingly clear.

"What was that back there? With Marlene?"

Remus stilled. "What are you talking about? I swear, if you don't start talking sense soon..."

"Did I interrupt anything back there? You two seemed very close."

It finally clicked. And Remus didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"You can't serious right now", Remus said, and it seemed to have been the wrong retort. Sirius crossed his arms, anger flaring in his eyes.

"Do I look like I'm trying to make fucking jokes?" Angrily, he took a step towards him. "How is anyone supposed to take that? I've never seen you hug her *like that* and then she whispers random things in your ear?"

Remus couldn't help it, he started laughing. What fucking teenage soap opera had he gotten himself into? He didn't have the nerve for that sort of thing.

His laughter made it worse. Sirius looked at him furiously. "Go ahead and make fun of me, asshole," he spat back at him before stomping angrily towards the stairs.

Remus looked after him for a moment and sighed inwardly. Braced himself for the impending discussion.

"Sirius," he said aloud just as Sirius had set foot on the stairs, "Marlene just whispered in my ear that she wished us a good shagging."

Sirius froze in place and his face darted in his direction. "What?"

Remus pointed back and forth between them. "Us. She meant..."

"She knows?" His eyes widened, horror replacing any anger for a moment.

Remus was a little taken aback. "Uh, yeah, she..."

"You told her?" he cut him off again and turned away from the stairs, coming towards him.

Annoyed, Remus crossed his arms. "Now let me finish!" Sirius stopped and looked at him agitatedly, his hands visibly shaking. Exasperated, Remus picked out his most de-escalating, soothing voice pitch.

"She figured it out on her own and asked me about it. There was no point in denying it." Remus took a deep breath. "She won't tell anyone, though, don't worry."

That seemed to reassure Sirius somewhat, but he was still surprisingly anxious. What was the big deal about his friends finding out?

"I see...", Sirius finally muttered and began to knead his fingers. Remus honestly didn't know what to do now. Sirius was sometimes like a time bomb, with its fuse changing by the minute.

"And you really thought there was something going on between me and Marlene?" he finally repeated, because he honestly couldn't believe it. "You really think I'm one of those kinds of people? Who, after a year and a half of secretly crushing on you, have nothing better to do than throw themselves at the next best person?"

Sirius paused. "A year and a half? You've been-"

"Yes," Remus interrupted the stammering. "And in case you still haven't realized, I'm *gay*."

Sirius looked like he was about to implode. The alcohol in his blood didn't seem to be helping him.

"I really don't know what's going on inside you sometimes, Sirius. It's not that complicated. The only one I want is you."

Even that tacky phrase didn't seem to help, on the contrary. Sirius looked at him, eyes widening, completely overwhelmed. Remus bit his tongue, took a few reluctant steps forward, and pulled Sirius into a hug.

"Stop that. It's all good," he murmured. It took a moment, then Sirius returned the hug, almost smothering him in the process.

"You idiot," Sirius finally whispered, his face pressed into Remus'

sweater.

Remus rolled his eyes. "I'm the idiot? Sirius the alcohol isn't doing you any good."

"I'm not that drunk," Sirius objected. "But I may have...*overreacted* a bit." The last part came out so squashed that Remus briefly thought Sirius would choke on it.

"A tiny bit, yeah. Didn't think you were the jealous type."

Sirius snorted indignantly. "I'm *not* 'the jealous type'!"

"You're the textbook definition, Sirius."

Sirius detached his face from Remus and looked at him angrily. "Shut up!"

"You shut up", was all Remus replied, and kissed him so that he finally did.

It was the good kind of kiss, the one Remus knew how to handle. There was definitely Sirius' affection in there, somewhere. But what he felt primarily was desire, tension, want. Like a huge wave, it crashed over him and drowned him, tasting of honey mead and cigarettes in the process. He quickly took over, took control and pressed Sirius against the nearest wall. Suddenly the prospect of letting off some *steam* didn't seem like that bad of an idea anymore.

Sirius kissed him passionately, with tongue and teeth, and continued to leave his marks all over Remus' neck. Eventually, he found his way up to his ear and breathed. "I think I should give you my birthday present now."

Remus roughly grabbed his face and brought their greedy lips together again. That idiot talked too much, far too much. Though now he wanted to hear something completely different from him. He used his whole body to pin Sirius against the wall, teasingly shoving his knee between his legs. There it was. Sirius moaned softly into his mouth. Music.

"Not here," Sirius gasped breathlessly as he managed to break the kiss briefly. "Come with me." He hesitantly pushed away from Remus, grabbed his hand and pulled him up the stairs. Remus knew he was about to cross a threshold. If he went with Sirius now, that was it for his last bit of blissful privacy, he would probably have to stay there

every night for the rest of his time in this filthy sham of a life. He pondered for a tiny moment, but then Sirius pushed open the door to his bedroom, casting Remus a brief, promising glance. It was enough to make him forget every single doubt. Remus followed him and let the door slam shut behind him, **irrevocably.**

Remus bridged the painful distance between them, kissed him erratically, began to pull at Sirius' shirt, interrupting the kiss only to pull it over his head. Sirius did the same, freeing him of his sweater and when their naked torsos met, it was as if lightning bolts struck through his body. He ran his hands greedily over Sirius' back, over his shoulders, his chest.

They landed on the bed, somehow, and Remus took the upper hand, tracing every movement of his hands once more with his tongue. Sirius moaned softly, his body covered in goosebumps, his eyes closed in pleasure. Remus wanted *more*.

Finally, as he let his hands wander lower and tried to undo Sirius' trousers, he felt Sirius grab his hand. Confused, he looked up and noticed Sirius' dark, amused look.

"My turn first."

And before Remus knew it, he was on his back, Sirius on top of him. He looked down at him, his cheeks flushed, his hair a black wreath around his face. Slowly, he leaned down to Remus and breathed into his ear, "Close your eyes."

Remus swallowed. He felt Sirius turn his attention to his upper body, caressing each of his myriad scars with his lips. Remus's breath caught, his hands guiding Sirius' movements, showing him that he wanted more. Sirius understood. He undid Remus' belt, his trousers, and pulled them down a little. Remus helped him eagerly, impatiently.

When Sirius finally got the last layer off and had Remus' cock in front of him, exposed and craving touch, he didn't hesitate. Remus just managed to inhale before Sirius took it in his mouth and deprived him of all air again. Remus bit his lip, a silent groan in his throat, while he felt the heat of Sirius' mouth and the way his tongue started moving.

And Sirius was surprisingly good at it. Remus could no longer hold back his moan, his fingers clawing into Sirius' hair, and resisting the overwhelming urge to thrust deep into his mouth.

His big mistake was to open his eyes at some point, against Sirius' instructions. When he caught sight of Sirius, lips around his cock, hair dishevelled, eyes dark and fixating on him, it sent him over the edge instantly. He came into Sirius's mouth, trembling all over, and briefly thought he was losing his mind as Sirius swallowed it all and continued mercilessly to the end, until Remus was completely limp and exhausted.

Remus tried to catch his breath. He watched Sirius let go of him, straightening up and brushing his dishevelled hair out of his face.

When he lay down next to him, Remus greeted him with a deep kiss and felt Sirius' persistent desire.

"You were so fucking hot," Sirius whispered hoarsely as Remus pulled away from him. Still riding on his blissful high, Remus smirked and reached between Sirius' legs, earning a breathless gasp. Someone was still a little tense.

"You ... you don't have to," Sirius moaned as Remus began massaging his erection through his trousers.

"Just shut up."

He tampered with Sirius's waistband again and this time he wasn't stopped. Generously wetting his fingers with his tongue, he reached into Sirius's trousers, watching Sirius's face so close to his own. He absorbed every little movement, watching him first bite his lower lip and finally gasp softly. How he searched his gaze, pupils wide, dripping with lust. It was very satisfying. He picked up speed, watching Sirius melt away in front of him, repossessing his lips, to feel every moan in his mouth.

It wasn't long before Sirius' whole body tensed too and he came into Remus' hand. Remus kept eye contact with him, taking it all in. Afterwards, they lay like that in silence for a little while, and eventually, without Sirius' arousal reflecting on him, Remus felt his mind slowly returning.

***Holy** shit.*

Was the first thought that got his brain going again. Somewhat overstrained, he put some distance between himself and Sirius and reached out for his wand, which had landed somewhere beside the

bed, to clean himself and Sirius up. Sirius allowed it, but after Remus had finished, he did exactly what he had dreaded: pulled him to him again, snuggling against his back, showering him with feather-light kisses.

"You're..." began Sirius, and Remus just couldn't bring himself to turn to him. "gorgeous."

The clarity in Remus's mind instantly displaced any attraction Sirius had had to him. Without a doubt it had been good, *very* good even, but that was it. Now he just wanted to leave.

But then again, that was exactly what he had planned to do, wasn't it? He was making himself irreplaceable to Sirius, digging himself in so deep into his heart that he couldn't be removed without breaking it into a thousand pieces. Maybe all that pathetic attachment was just something he had to endure in the process.

"Are you okay?" asked Sirius a little worriedly when Remus made no move to return his caresses. Remus collected himself for a moment before turning and kissing Sirius on the tip of the nose. "Yes. More than that, actually."

Sirius looked relieved. "I'm glad."

He forced himself to pull Sirius close to him, holding out for a few moments before throwing himself a rescuing rope to the shore. "But now I really need a cigarette."

Sirius laughed softly. "Count me in on that."

Remus nodded and hastily straightened up, searching for his crumpled clothes and pulling them on carelessly. Like a drowning man, he rescued himself onto the balcony and took a deep breath, enjoying the brief moment he had alone until Sirius arrived. Fuck, did he hate all this physical closeness.

They spent the first half of their cigarette in silence. Stared alternately at the cloudy sky or the dark rooftops in front of them, lost in blissful emptiness, or as in Remus' case, feverish thoughts. He only now really realised that Sirius would surely want him to sleep in his bed from now on. He darkly remembered that his mind had wanted to warn him of exactly that. But he had only been thinking with his....

"How did Marlene find out?" asked Sirius suddenly.

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't ask exactly... you can do that next time. She just said we were 'not very subtle'."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Do you think anyone else picked up on it then?"

Remus looked at him thoughtfully, holding the filter of the cigarette inches from his lips as he did so. "I don't know, I don't think so." He considered and finally lowered the cigarette. "But even if, what does it matter?"

Sirius pressed his lips together. "Nothing at all..."

"What are you afraid of?" asked Remus flatly. "Do you think any of them would have a problem with it?"

"No!" replied Sirius immediately. "No, I'm sure they wouldn't."

"Then what's the problem?"

Sirius shook his head. "Do we have to talk about this now?"

Yes, absolutely. Let's start an argument, please, so you can banish me from your bed again.

"Not necessarily," he said instead. "But I'd like to know."

Sirius looked down at his lap in agony.

"I'm the problem."

"What?"

"*Me*," Sirius repeated, impatiently. "I'm the only one standing in my way. I... " He groaned, annoyed, and started again. "Oh damn, you know what kind of family I come from! It's not so easy to suddenly be what you were taught to reject as a child."

"Oh, so you've still got to get over the fact that you're into dick?" It sounded a little cruder than it was supposed to.

"Don't say it like that!" said Sirius angrily, blood rushing to his cheeks. "I hate myself for that, too, okay? I'm also sorry you had such a horrible first kiss with me because I just couldn't face it. Not until... until you..."

"Until you realised what it was doing to you when I might be gone

forever?" said Remus, and it came to him perhaps a touch too easily, because Sirius looked at him in shock and just nodded mutely.

"It's okay, though," Remus added. "I kind of caught you off guard too, didn't I? Anyone with your family history would need time with that. Take as much as you need, I'm happy you open up to me at least."

Sirius smiled at him. "Thanks."

Remus flicked his ashes. "You're welcome."

Then they lapsed back into silence. Remus finished his smoke and waited patiently for Sirius before they returned to the warm bedroom. Remus's premonition came true when, before leaving for the bathroom, Sirius pressed a soft kiss to Remus's cheek and whispered, "Will you stay with me tonight?"

"Of course," Remus replied lightly, as if it didn't cause him physical pain.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Keine Angst / Don’t be Afraid' by Casper feat. Drangsal
(Caspers voice may not be everyones cup of tea, but his lyrics and instrumentals are always fantastic.)

This chapter was lovely to write! Though it got a bit out of hand in terms of length (at least for my standards). Don’t expect it to become the norm, I’m a slow writer so this chapter took me fucking four sessions to finish lol

Hope you liked it.

See ya! ;)

Chapter 12: Irreversible

Chapter Notes

CW Emotional Manipulation, Lots of Swearing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything can get better, said Mr. Keuner,

except for mankind.

"Shit," Remus muttered as he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. Absent-mindedly, he rubbed his wet hair dry with the towel and stared at his neck, which was glowing in all colours thanks to Sirius' caresses. He didn't even remember most of them, but by now almost everything from last night was a blur.

While he shaved and brushed his teeth, the sun climbed over the horizon and shone tentatively through the bathroom window. Remus was awake far too early, his heavy eyelids confirming that. But he hadn't been able to bear feeling Sirius' body against his side and his breath on his bare skin any longer. He was glad that Sirius had slumbered blissfully on as he wriggled out of his grasp and slipped out of the room. It gave him some time to sort out his thoughts.

After he finished in the bathroom, he went downstairs, opening all the windows to get rid of the alcohol haze. He put on a record and began to clean up the remaining traces of the evening. This time he let spells take care of almost everything, but this time he didn't have a jealous Sirius behind him staring holes in the back of his head.

It wasn't long before the room looked like new and Remus set about preparing breakfast. If he made an effort and cooked for Sirius, it might be an excuse for buggering off from Sirius' bed so early. He picked together eggs, bacon, beans and toast and set to work in silence.

Between the hissing of the pan as the bacon exhaled its final breath, it was a while before Remus heard the soft tapping on the kitchen window. When he finally turned his head, he was startled to recognise

a large owl at the window, impatiently hammering on the pane with its beak.

Hastily he let it in, picked up the latest issue of the Daily Prophet and quickly gathered some coins to pay. As soon as he had done so, the owl flew off again, striking him in the face with its wing by a hair.

"Fucking bastard," he muttered, looking at the prophet. He remembered that Sirius had suggested subscribing to it at some point. It was a quicker way to learn about Death Eater machinations and events at the Ministry. Remus scanned the first page but could find nothing of interest.

He carelessly put the paper aside and noticed in the margins how a leaflet fell out and slid to the floor. Too lazy to bend down, he hastily conjured the leaflet into the bin next to the door and paid no further attention.

He took the bacon out of the pan and continued with the eggs, in parallel filling two glasses with juice and making coffee. On his way towards the living room, cutlery and juice in his hands, he noticed that the leaflet was lying next to it instead of in the bin. He rolled his eyes, took the stuff to the dining table and on the way back bent down after it to put it in by hand. He dropped it, but like a stubborn feather it changed trajectory on the way down and floated past the trash to the floor.

"Are you kidding me?" Annoyed, Remus picked it up again and this time pressed it aggressively into the trash. But the moment he let it go, a strong wind blew out of the trash and flung the leaflet back outside.

Surrendered, he picked up the note, took the pan from the heat and leaned against the counter. It looked like a simple advertisement, with 'Circus Letum' written in bold letters at the top. Below that, a little smaller 'soon in your town too!'. The brochure didn't look particularly magical at first glance, the little artists on the first page moving only slightly. He flipped open the brochure and read the text.

Circus Letum, the tradition-rich group returns! And looks forward to sharing their magic with YOU! Be prepared for fantastic animals, fantastic people and magic like you've never seen before!

Below were a few magical creatures, including a fire crab and a hippogriff, whose gaze seemed to follow the viewer. On the other side, in shallow flashing letters, it said: 'Find out now where and when *your*

next show is! Just put your finger on the marked spot!'

An arrow pointed to a grey dot, the size of a Galleon. Remus frowned, looking at the spot for a moment before finally pressing his index finger to it. Suddenly the paper began to vibrate in his hands. Remus stared at it, watching the hippogriff and crab disappear, along with the writing, to make way for something else. Pale, menacing faces appeared, paired with pitch black, spidery writing:

The time has come, friend.

And underneath:

The war will soon enter a new phase. The Dark Lord has called a meeting. You too are now ready for it, have proven that you are convinced of the cause. On March 12, 1979, at midnight you will be officially accepted into our circle. It will take place anonymously, no one will know who you are. You will be under the personal protection of the Dark Lord.

Remus felt excitement rising inside him, clung to the leaflet and read the remaining lines:

Receive your robe and mask until the meeting to ensure your anonymity. It will be provided for you at 12 Grimmauld place. There you will also receive details of the location.

Honour to the Dark Lord!

A few seconds after he had finished reading the message, the leaflet burst into flames. The fire left his fingers untouched, but it ate up the paper completely. A moment later Remus stared at his empty palms.

An invitation, to the first meeting. To his official acceptance. Remus clenched his fists triumphantly, a smile stealing onto his lips. It had to be a great honour to be accepted as a full member this early. It was a testament to Voldemort's trust in him, to his crucial role. Remus would do anything to make sure the Lord was pleased with him.

Absently, he picked up the pan in which the half-finished fried eggs were cooking in the residual heat and placed it back on the hot plate. He had to make sure he gathered his information so far and could provide preliminary results at the meeting, if necessary. Number and names of members, strategies and shifts, everything his friends had dropped in their careless asides. There was no time to lose.

He finished frying the eggs, trying to calm himself down again. He couldn't get nervous now, Sirius would notice. He had to carry on as before, calm, composed, without arousing suspicion. And if Sirius started asking stupid questions, he now knew how to silence him effectively.

Just before Remus finished, Sirius came shuffling into the kitchen, his hair sticking out in all directions and his eyes small and tired. Remus smiled casually at him as he loaded the baked beans onto his plate.

"Morning," Sirius murmured, hugging him lazily from behind, resting his chin on Remus' shoulder.

"Morning," Remus replied, leaning his head to the side so that it gently touched Sirius'. "Sleep well?"

"Hmmh," Sirius mumbled, his eyes closed. "Too little."

"What got you out of bed at such an ungodly hour?"

"It smelled so good," Sirius said, pressing his face into Remus' shoulder. "You smell good too."

Remus laughed, putting his utensils away and turning in Sirius' arms so he could look at him. The hangover was written all over his face.

"Thought you might want some breakfast, it'll get rid of the residual alcohol."

"You thought correctly," Sirius said, kissing him languidly. He allowed the kiss to linger for a moment, but then he disengaged with a played busyness and gestured to the living room. "Sit down, I'll bring you your food."

"You're an angel, Moony," Sirius smiled and shuffled out of the kitchen. Remus took one deep breath, poured coffee into the waiting cups and whisked them to the dining table. Then he took the two fully loaded plates, took one last look at the blameless Daily Prophet and followed Sirius.

They didn't speak much as they ate. Sirius downed the juice in one go and had a surprisingly good appetite. Remus was a little more

restrained, the anticipation of the meeting, but also the tension that came with it, weighing on his stomach.

"I want to go into town this afternoon, run some errands." Remus said casually, and Sirius gave him a cursory glance as he loaded baked beans onto his fork. "We didn't have anything planned today that would get in the way of that, did we?"

Sirius shook his head. "Nope, nothing today, thankfully," he said with his mouth half full. He swallowed the food and cleared his throat. "... Do you want me to come with you?" he asked cautiously, that protective look on his face again.

That's right, this was the first time he'd leave the house alone. So there was Mummy Sirius again, of course.

"Nah, thanks, I can handle it," he said firmly. "I'll have to socialise again eventually, won't I?"

Sirius nodded, albeit hesitantly. "Yeah, all right."

First hurdle cleared.

***

September 2, 1972

Sirius has a brother. His name is Regulus, just as strange a name as Sirius. He's a year younger, so he arrived yesterday. Slytherin. Sirius has been up all night, I pretended not to notice. He doesn't like talking about Regulus, says he's a mummy's boy with no opinion of his own. He also says he doesn't care that he's in Slytherin, but I don't believe him. Sirius is a bad liar.

***

Regulus looked just like Sirius. Now, at their second meeting, Remus

only really noticed it. Not just the paleness, the cheekbones or the shape of the eyes. Even the way he crossed his arms, looked at him and finally rolled his eyes, all a perfect reflection of his brother.

"What are you doing here?" asked Regulus, annoyed, but stepping aside to let him enter.

Remus smiled engagingly and waited until the door was closed. "I was informed of the upcoming meeting. I was told to come here to receive my uniform."

Regulus eyed him blankly. "You picked the wrong time for that. Cissy is in charge of that, but she won't be here until tomorrow."

Remus' smile widened. "I'm sure someone else can be found to take over."

"I'm here on my own."

"Perfect, then that's settled."

Regulus had good control of his face, but not his eyes. The irritation in them turned to anger. "I'm not your fucking maid."

"And I'm not a fucking dog who comes and goes when it suits Lord Regulus Black. It's risky enough for me to show up here once. So give me my fucking cloak and I'll be on my way."

Regulus massaged the bridge of his nose and Remus could tell something was on the tip of his tongue, but he withheld it. Wise decision.

"Come on, then. And don't touch anything."

"Wonderful," Remus commented, following Regulus down the stairs. There was no sign of the fight between the Order and the Death Eaters when he had been freed, presumably the old house-elf had taken care of that.

Regulus led him down the long corridor, past the torture chambers and prison cells to a wooden door fitted with two magical locks, which he began to fiddle with quietly. Remus watched him in silence. He was a little shorter than Sirius, but only by an inch or two. His shoulders were also a little narrower, making him appear more delicate. He wore his hair quite short, but still long enough that it curled in the same way as....

"What are you gawking at?" asked Regulus, irritated, as he undid the second lock from the door and pushed it open.

"I was just wondering how long I'm going to have to wait around here."

Regulus gestured into the room. "Let's go."

Remus obeyed and stepped into what looked like a giant walk-in wardrobe. Along the walls, mountains of fabric and clothing were lined in open cupboards. Hanging from huge metal bars that ran down the middle of the room to Remus' left and right were cloaks, capes and other strange things that didn't look like anyone would survive their touch unscathed. Directly opposite the door was a large standing mirror.

"Is that...," Remus began, but Regulus interrupted him irritably.

"Save your patter. Some of the stuff in here is worth more than your whole fucking life. Stop stop, that's not true: probably most of it."

"Funny."

Regulus stomped past Remus, unimpressed, to one of the shelves and rummaged around inside. "The fabric is enchanted. Once you put your cloak on and cast on proper enchantment, you can put it on and off at will in a flash. All it takes is a snap of the fingers. Comes in handy when you need a quick dip."

Regulus pulled velvety black fabric from the bottom of the pile of clothes and unfolded it to examine it. "This should fit you," he murmured, draping it over his forearm. Remus watched as Regulus turned back to him, eyeing him waitingly.

"Okay?" said Remus warily, unsure of what to do now.

Regulus looked at him as if he were an obtuse toddler. "You have to try it on."

"Give it here, then."

"You might wanna take your jacket off first for that. If you want the cloak to adjust to you, it should make at least a little contact with your skin."

" You could have just said that," Remus rolled his eyes and hurriedly

took off his jacket.

"Oh, I thought, since you're so smart, surely you'd know that already."

"Don't push it, Regulus," Remus said, his gaze warning. After tossing his jacket to the floor, he took off his hoodie as well, so Regulus wouldn't have room for any more snarky comments. Now wearing only a T-shirt, he stood in front of Regulus and held out his hand promptly. "Give it to me, then."

Regulus handed him the cloak, his gaze dismissive. But then it moved down a little, just as Remus grasped the fabric, and his eyes widened. Remus frowned and looked down at himself, but couldn't see anything noticeable.

"What is it?" asked Remus irritably, watching Regulus, who was suddenly deathly pale and staring as if he had a Dementor in front of him.

"Nothing," he muttered, letting go of the cloth, averting his gaze.

Remus looked down at himself again and then into the mirror, which finally gave him the answer: On his neck, quite prominently. His confusion turned to spiteful satisfaction. Busily he began to put on the cloak and kept peering at Regulus, who was staring into space.

"Did you know?" asked Remus casually, dipping his arms into the cloak's sleeves, feeling the velvety fabric flow like water over his skin.

"What are you talking about?" asked Regulus coldly, having caught his gaze again.

"That Sirius has the hots for me."

Regulus didn't flinch at the words, but cold anger shot into his eyes. Remus laughed.

"So you did."

"I don't give a damn what my brother does or wants."

"You're just as bad a liar as he is."

"Shut the fuck up, you don't know me."

"No, and I don't want to, honey. You're about the most unpleasant person to be around."

Regulus looked like he wanted to punch him. Remus, meanwhile, unapologetically smoothed away any remaining wrinkles and looked at himself in the mirror. It suited him. He put on the pointed hood, which cast deep shadows on his face. Even better. All that was missing now was the mask.

"Now what?" he asked impatiently, waiting for Regulus to do something. He seemed to seethe silently for another moment, then stepped towards him and drew his wand.

"Hold still, I'm casting the spell on it."

Remus almost expected Regulus to use that as an excuse to curse him, but he was almost cautious as he ran the wand along his body.

"What about it..." whispered Regulus at one point, clutching his wand so tightly that his knuckles stood out white, "makes you think this is a good idea?"

"What now?"

Regulus didn't answer until he had finished his spell. "The thing with Sirius." He lowered his wand and stared at Remus' chest, his lips pressed together into a thin line.

Remus looked at him dismissively. "Where's the downside in that? It only makes it easier, doesn't it? Give me a few more weeks and Sirius is more likely to suspect himself than me."

Regulus snorted angrily. "This isn't a game."

"Oh, come on," Remus said, now looking at him like he was the obtuse one. "Have you forgotten what my fucking job is? I'm supposed to destroy the Order, get every single member killed. And you're upset that I fuck one of them? Do you even hear yourself?"

"He's my fucking brother."

"Ah, get it, as long as I just kill him I'm fine, but I better not lay a hand on him first."

Regulus grabbed him by the collar, a brave undertaking given the fact that he was half a head shorter than Remus. "You just don't get it," he hissed hatefully.

"Get off me," Remus said menacingly, any disparaging amusement

gone. "Or you'll regret it."

Regulus pierced him with his gaze, chasing every curse at him in his mind, Remus could see it clearly. But then, after a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, he finally loosened his grip and turned away from him.

"You're playing with fire," he finally muttered, and Remus recognised an unexpectedly sorrowful look across the mirror. A look he would never willingly show Remus.

"Don't be so pathetic," Remus groaned, looking to his enchanted cloak. "What's the big deal? It's just sex." Curious, he snapped his fingers and sure enough, the cloak disappeared without a trace. There he stood again, nondescript in a T-shirt and jeans.

Regulus snorted again, an annoying sound. "You really don't know Sirius at all." He trudged to the shelf again and this time, one shelf down, took out a silver decorated mask. He turned it once in his hand before tossing it carelessly to Remus.

"Believe me, I know him very well." Remus tried the mask on, it fit like a glove. His vision was slightly restricted by the narrow eye holes, but they ensured that he was unrecognisable. "I've known him for two weeks and he already trusts me more than he ever trusted you. But who can blame him? Just look at yourself."

That was the final straw. Regulus dropped his icy mask, a blush of anger rising to his face. "YOU!" he shouted indignantly. "Take your shit and fuck off!"

"Don't exaggerate," Remus said, raising his hands placatingly.

Regulus stormed towards him, pointing his index finger accusingly. "Are you deaf? Get out of here! Get out of my sight!"

There were tears of anger in his eyes, pathetic. Remus wanted to keep probing, to find out what else was eating him up from the inside. But he had what he wanted. And was getting tired of this childish fussing.

"All right, I'm going." Annoyed, he picked up his clothes and pulled them on. As if Regulus wasn't about to punch him in the face, he held the mask out to him. "Is this enchanted already too? Can it do the same as the cloak?"

Petrified, Regulus nodded, seemingly incapable of an answer. He

gestured to the door and Remus rolled his eyes. "Calm down, I get it."

They left the room and Remus waited until Regulus had locked the door again. Then he led the way, up the narrow staircase, until they were finally back at the front door.

"Good, that's settled then," Remus said, thinking. "And then where do I have to be at midnight on the 12th?"

Regulus opened the door almost mechanically, seeming to slowly scrape together what was left of his composure. "Hyde Park, Achilles statue," was all he said. Remus looked at him, amused. "Well, until then, darling."

Remus had barely stepped over the threshold before the door slammed behind him. It had so much force that it shook on its hinges.

Wow, so much strength, Remus thought as he snapped and made the mask disappear.

And still you're so weak.

***

Sirius was sound asleep on the couch when Remus returned. He was wearing boxer shorts and a loose black T-shirt that had ridden up a little, revealing a strip of pale skin. His hair was still damp from the shower and stuck to his head, his mouth was open and he was snoring softly. He looked like he was taking the nap of the century.

Quietly, Remus placed his token purchases on the dining table and took a sip from the half-empty water bottle that stood within reach. Afterwards, he regarded Sirius silently for a while, lost in thought. After all, if he always slept this soundly, Remus wouldn't have to worry when he went to his entrance ceremony tomorrow night. The Achilles statue in Hyde Park. He'd never seen it, but weren't there an awful lot of people in that area? Even at night, surely you were rarely alone. Or was the statue rather an entrance to...?

Sirius turned lazily to the other side, his eyes still tightly shut. Remus could clearly see the marks on his face. His gaze fell on the coffee table, where there was an empty glass, a packet of multivitamin tablets and the photo album Remus had been given yesterday and hadn't paid attention to since.

Too lazy to get up, he accioed the album towards him and looked at it again in peace, without six pairs of pesky eyes watching him. It wasn't particularly thick, maybe 30 pages, each with a small photo and handwritten entry. The entries themselves weren't usually very substantive either, often just something like *"my favourite picture of you!". <3 The sex appeal!!!"* next to a picture of him about to sneeze or grimace as if he had just bitten into the world's hottest chilli. The writing next to it mostly belonged to Sirius, who else. A few pages further on, he recognised much neater writing, this time from Lily.

That's you in the library, with a few other students. You used to tutor them in charms. You'd make a really good teacher, Remus. You always had so much patience with them.

He looked at the picture, it was obviously one from the pocket camera. He was wearing a Gryffindor robe, his face turned away from the camera, looking at a couple of students who had their heads buried in thick books. You could tell from his cheeks that he was smiling, having fun. He couldn't for the life of him imagine that such a thing was fun.

He turned the pages some more, looking at a picture of Peter proudly petting a Jarvey and one of Mary and Marlene, both in their Quidditch uniforms, giving thumbs up and grinning excitedly. It was strange to recognise himself and his friends in so many of the pictures, laughing, angry, annoyed. He didn't remember any of them, not even close. It was as if he was looking at the life of his secret twin brother. Alienating. He had the feeling most at the cover picture, where they were all together. Huddled together, boisterous, as if they were best friends, always would be. Remus felt a dull sensation in his stomach. He might be getting hungry.

"Uaha," Sirius rumbled, stretching with another primal scream. Remus hurriedly pushed the album away from him.

"Oh God," Sirius continued to croak, rubbing his eyes. "Who am I? And where?"

"Sleep well?" asked Remus and Sirius turned to him, completely flabbergasted.

"Back already?" he asked, running a hand through his flattened hair.

"What do you mean already? It's almost evening."

Sirius raised his eyebrows and shook his head in disbelief. "I think I've

landed in another dimension."

"Don't worry, it's alright here too."

Sirius snorted and swung his legs off the couch. Then he stared into space, seeming to take another moment to pull himself back up. Amused, Remus watched him go.

"Did you... did you get everything you wanted?" asked Sirius at one point, blurting and massaging the back of his neck.

"Yes," Remus said, rummaging in the small paper bag. "I took the film from my pocket camera to be developed and I went to the bookshop."

He pulled out the book in question, it was small and unremarkable. 'Steppenwolf' by Hermann Hesse. He had no idea of the blurb, he had only picked it out because of the cover. A man, with the shadow of a wolf. Somehow fitting.

Sirius eyed the book frowningly. "Oh, I think I've heard of that."

"You?" he asked, irritated. "It's a Muggle book."

Sirius shrugged. "James told me about it once."

"James?" Stranger still. "I didn't know James ever read anything voluntarily."

He hoped he didn't overdo it with his remarks at some point and caused astonishment. But Sirius let it pass, just rolling his eyes and saying, "Wow, he's nineteen for one day and already he's turning into a mean old man."

Remus smiled and put the book down on the table. "I've always been a mean old man at heart."

Sirius looked at him gently. "Nonsense. There are few people kinder than you."

"Oh, yeah, and who?"

Sirius threw himself back on the couch, seeming to have finally given up his attempt to get up. "Well, me."

"I don't know what answer I was expecting."

Sirius lay on his back and stretched his arms in the air, spreading

them out. He lay there like that for a while and Remus watched him do it, somewhat confused, until finally Sirius groaned in annoyance. "Now get over here!"

As if pulled by an invisible rope, Remus rose hastily and deliberately plopped himself heavily on top of Sirius. The latter gasped like an old woman with lumbago.

"Urgh, Moony, are you trying to crush me?"

Remus shrugged. "Maybe."

Sirius grimaced. "You're such a twat." Then he wrapped his arms around Remus' neck and pulled him close to kiss him.

They kissed for a while and Remus soon made it back to his comfort zone, where everything was no longer tightening up inside him, but where he had something to do, could turn his head off. It wasn't long before there were heated touches, soft sighs and Remus was once more lost in his desire, pressing against Sirius and absorbing it all. It felt really good. At least until they were done.

Later, they lay lazily on top of each other, Remus with his head on Sirius' chest. The way Remus was lying, his lower legs stuck out over the end of the couch, but he didn't care. Either way, their proximity wasn't particularly comfortable for him, not anymore. But in this position at least he didn't have to look at Sirius, so it was bearable.

Sirius stroked his hair gently. "Somehow I can't get it out of my head."

"What?"

"A year and a half?" Sirius' fingers began to massage his scalp. "You've had a crush on me for a year and a half? Why didn't you ever say anything?"

Remus shrugged, closing his eyes. "Didn't know how. And was afraid of the reaction."

There was silence for a while. "Honestly, I don't know how I would have reacted to you telling me either," Sirius finally muttered. "Bad enough."

Remus put a hand on Sirius' stomach and gently stroked the warm

skin. "It's okay. We talked about it."

"Hmm," Sirius made, thoughtfully. "I'm just surprised I just didn't notice for a year and a half."

"I've always been good at hiding things."

"You shouldn't have to be, though."

Remus snorted in amusement.

"You should know...that you can tell me anything. No matter what it is. I can take it. I don't want you to be alone with any of your problems."

"Anything?"

"Yes," Sirius affirmed, moving his fingers further through Remus's hair, as light as a feather.

Remus opened his eyes again, languidly.

I feel nothing for you, can barely stand to be near you. As of tomorrow, I am a Death Eater and I will betray you all, one by one. I may even kill you. And I won't mind. How does that sound to you? How are you taking that?

“Thank you, Sirius,” he just murmured, feeling Sirius lean his head forward and breathe a kiss into his hair.

***

As it turned out, Remus was right: The Achilles statue was an entrance. It took him some patience to find the right spot, thanks to Regulus' bitchy reluctance to go into details. But finally, in the darkness unseen by the Muggles, he managed to slip through the pedestal and found himself instantly in a shimmering green corridor tiled to the ceiling. He flicked his right hand and felt his cloak instantly hug him, as did his black and silver mask. It gave him the confidence to continue walking steadily.

The corridor was long, with no side passages, no discernible end. Just as Remus wondered if he was caught in a magical illusion, a figure emerged from the shadows in front of him, a woman, in Death Eater uniform. It took only one word to realise it was Bellatrix.

"Good evening, friend," she purred, not letting on if she knew who he was.

"Good evening," he replied, his gaze fixed firmly on her.

"Follow me, the ceremony will begin soon." She turned and booted off, so fast that Remus almost had to jog to keep up.

They covered another 20 yards until Bellatrix suddenly came to a jerky halt, midway between two candlesticks in which candles of green fire burned. She pulled out her wand and pointed it at the wall tiles, moving her mouth silently. Shortly afterwards, the tiles began to vibrate, turned and moved aside, clacking loudly. As with the passage to Diagon Alley, the wall opened in front of them, creating a small passageway, just wide enough for one person. Remus let Bellatrix go first and followed her on quiet soles.

They entered a small hall, similar in structure to a church. The walls were high and their every footstep echoed against them. The ceiling was supported by large marble columns, many small soaring wall formations, with dark towers and columns gave the hall a Gothic appearance. There were no windows, light was provided by fire bowls floating in the air, in which the same green fire burned as before on the candles. They cast flickering light on a large crowd of black-clad Death Eaters. They had their backs turned to them, forming a semicircle that opened onto a balcony that was currently empty. Presumably not for much longer, however.

"Stand with your brothers and sisters," Bellatrix said, gesturing to the crowd in front of them. Remus nodded silently and started to leave, but then Bellatrix touched him on the arm and he turned to her.

"It won't take long. Enjoy it, it will be your moment."

So she did know it was him. His moment. Sounded exciting. Remus nodded to her before joining the others. There were around thirty of them, considerably more than in the Order. And although he hardly knew anyone, most of them seemed to be men, some as tall as he was, but their shoulders almost twice as broad. These were not people you wanted to mess with. Who was so stupid as to voluntarily join the Order when they had such guys as enemies?

It only took a few minutes for the fires above their heads to dim, bathing them in a menacing, lurking dark green. All eyes turned

upwards to the balcony, where a few moments later an elegant figure emerged from the shadows. It was him. The Dark Lord. Awe-struck, Remus looked at him as he stood centrally above them and spread his arms invitingly.

"Welcome, my brothers and sisters," he called out and the Death Eaters around him bowed to him in unison, Remus joining them.

"I am pleased that you could all come in such numbers. That you all wish to witness the start of our victory march."

Approval surged to Voldemort, after just two sentences. They hung on his lips, just as Remus did. There was something about him, something about his burning eyes, about his all-encompassing aura that made him impossible to resist. The Imperius Curse had to feel something like that.

"For today, my dear friends, we will make history. Not only do we have a new member in our ranks, no, with his help we will also get a whole lot closer to our goal. We will destroy our enemies. And free this world of impure blood at last."

The Death Eaters listened to him spellbound, hungry for more. But Voldemort only pointed across them, to the back row, to Remus. He had recognised him immediately through all the identical cloaks and masks.

"Step forward, friend," Voldemort said solemnly, and before him the group parted like the tiles in the wall. The tall, menacing Death Eaters stood in line for him, letting him step forward, taking him into their midst.

Voldemort smiled warmly at him. "Welcome," he repeated. Remus just nodded and looked up at Voldemort as if he were a king.

"I am heartbroken that we can only accept you anonymously into our ranks, when you do such important things for us. But I cannot take any chances, not even a small one. Your identity will remain the secret of my inner circle, who will show their deepest gratitude for your service."

Voldemort took a step forward and floated gently down the balcony. He landed a few steps in front of Remus, who followed a sudden reflex and knelt down.

He heard Voldemort's laugh. "A loyal servant knows when to kneel. I

like you better by the minute."

Voldemort strode towards him, circling him, and Remus looked stubbornly straight. Eventually, after what felt like an eternity, Voldemort's legs came back into his field of vision. A metre in front of him, he stopped.

"Look at me," he commanded, and Remus obeyed. His eyes were an icy grey, gleaming slightly.

"Are you willing and ready to sacrifice your life for the sake of the pure blood?"

Remus answered, without hesitation. "I am."

"Are you ready to leave your old life behind and become something greater, with my help?"

"I am."

"And are you ready to serve me and only me for the rest of your days?"

"I am."

An engaging smile played around Voldemort's features. "Then hold out your arm."

Remus obeyed again. Voldemort drew his wand and stepped closer. Almost tenderly, he grasped Remus' arm, pulling back the cloak and exposing the pale, scarred skin.

"My first gift to you." He pressed his wand into Remus's skin and it started to burn as if on fire. Remus drew in a sharp breath, but stifled a pained cry. It was almost a minute before Voldemort released his wand from his arm again and the burning subsided. When Voldemort let go, Remus looked at it curiously. Halfway between his wrist and elbow, he now had a tattoo of sorts, a skull with a snake coiled around it.

"The Dark Mark," Voldemort intoned, moving away from Remus. "The mark that unites us all, reminds us of who we are. A great honor."

Voldemort continued to speak after that, but Remus was so taken by the mark that he was only peripherally aware of it. He talked about purity, the new war, a no-holds-barred war. About the eradication of

the Order of the Phoenix. It sounded wonderful. He proudly covered the mark, feeling it tingle shallowly under his skin, constantly reminding him that it was there. He was now officially one of them.

The war could begin.

Chapter End Notes

Quote: 'Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner/ Stories of Mr. Keuner' by Bertolt Brecht (B.B. my beloved.)

[additional FYI about that (sorry for the wall of text): Stories of Mr. Keuner is a collection of thoughts from a man named 'Mr. Keuner' or just 'Mr. K.'. 'Keuner' (pronounced 'coin-er') is southern German slang for 'Keiner' which means 'nobody'. Mr. K. is described as 'the thinking man', highly rational and reasonable in his mannerism, sometimes too much for his own good. I find most of the thoughts quite relatable, so I picked a few of my favorites and will scatter them into future chapters. I just wanted to explain who Mr. Keuner is, so you won't be confused if his name gets mentioned in these bits.]

So, Remus is now officially a Death Eater. It can only go downhill from here….

Thank you for reading :*

Next chapter will be up in about a week, I'm going on vacation! :))

See ya!

Chapter 13: All We Are

Chapter Notes

> CW: Emotional Manipulation, Gaslighting, (Explicit) Sexual Content (If you want to skip that, leave out the parts between 'Deja-vu' and 'They', both words are written in bold letters and underlined.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All we are is true

I can read it in your eyes

As we're catching fire

Now we're out of time

We could try out all the things we never tried

Remus was one of the last to leave the meeting. He soaked up all the impressions, enjoying the cool, clear air and the silent echo of what had just been said. As unbearable as it was to put up with Sirius and the others, this made it worth it. If he brought them success, they would celebrate him here, and Voldemort himself would reward him. Nothing else mattered.

Slowly he strolled out of the hall, roamed through the corridor, back towards the exit. Just before he did, however, someone blocked his way.

"There you are, asshole," he was growled at, recognising Regulus' angry voice. "Thought you were still in there jerking off to Voldemort's praises."

Remus regarded him dismissively. "What do you want?"

"My cousin sent me," he hissed. "I'm supposed to give you this."

He thrust a small box into Remus' hand. He accepted it but hesitated.

"You can open it, it's not Pandora's box."

"What's in it?"

Regulus groaned in annoyance, grabbed the box and rudely tore it open. Inside were a dozen small vials of a blueish liquid, neatly corked and lined up tidily.

"You have to drink these. One every day. The potion will make the dark mark invisible. It will help you remain undetected."

Remus frowned at the vials. "What is that, some kind of Polyjuice Potion? Does it taste as disgusting?"

Regulus looked at him a little puzzled. "Er yeah... you can think of it like that. I don't know how it tastes, haven't tried it. But from experience, potions like this always taste like shit."

"You made these?" asked Remus incredulously.

Regulus crossed his arms. "Yes. I make most of our potions."

Remus took out one of the vials and flipped the box shut again. "Wouldn't think someone like you would know how to do that."

"Shut the fuck up," Regulus hissed and turned to leave. "Or you can take care of the fucking mark yourself in the future."

"All right, all right," Remus curtsied and stowed the box in his jacket pocket. He waited until Regulus had disappeared before uncorking the vial and emptying it in one go. It tasted disgusting, as expected, of mould and rancid milk, but it took effect immediately. He felt a slight tingling on his forearm and the next time he looked at it, the mark was gone. At least on the outside, because he continued to feel it, a comforting presence, a connection to his people. It would help him keep his sanity.

He pocketed the empty vial, flicked his cloak away and, holding his breath, stepped out through the wall.

***

Remus knew he had a problem when he apparated outside the flat and saw that the lights were on. Eyes wide, he ran to the door, fumbled his

keys out of his pocket and in the next moment was already running into the living room, shoes and jacket still on.

"Sirius?" he called, sticking his head into the kitchen, but he was nowhere to be found. Suddenly he heard a wild stomping and creaking and turned to the stairs. There stood Sirius, completely beside himself.

"Where have you been?" he yelled at him. Then, without waiting for an answer, he ran up to Remus and pulled him into a fierce hug. His whole body shook.

"It's all right. I'm back," he tried to reassure him, panicking as he tried to think of an excuse as to why he had disappeared in the middle of the night without a word.

What the hell had happened to Sirius's sound sleep?

"Nothing's okay!" screeched Sirius, breaking away from Remus. Wildly, he grabbed him by the shoulders, his eyes wide and red. "Where have you been?"

Remus gently placed his hands at Sirius's sides. "Going for a walk," he said, and Sirius laughed humourlessly.

"In the middle of the night? Since when do you do that?"

"Since I have... nightmares," he replied, feeling some tension drain out of Sirius. "It helps me clear my head again."

"Nightmares?" repeated Sirius, lost. He looked at him like a dog that had been left abandoned at a motorway services.

"Yes," Remus repeated, unwrapping his best pitiful smile. "At night, it's not always as easy to suppress everything."

It was having an effect. Sirius lowered his eyes, looking drained and sad all at once. "Why didn't you say something? You can't disappear without a trace, not after all that happ..."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, hugging Sirius tightly. "I should have left you a note or something. Won't happen again."

Sirius let himself fall into the hug, taking a deep breath and exhaling shakily. "I really thought you were..."

"Don't think about stuff like that. It's all right." Remus stroked his back

and stared at the floor. "Have you ... told anyone?"

Sirius shook his head and relief flooded through Remus. "Just woke up a few minutes ago. I did want to send a Patronus to James, but I was a bit too upset for that."

"We really need a telephone," Remus quipped, and it made Sirius snort.

"I can't handle it anyway," he muttered.

"I'll show you. And Lily knows how to do it too, she'll explain it to James. Then we can react quicker in a case like this."

"Hmm," Sirius made hesitantly. "Maybe not a bad idea."

"Told you."

They stood motionless for a while longer. Remus waited for Sirius to break the hug of his own accord, but he took an awful long time. Eventually, though, he sighed and let go of Remus, looking a little embarrassed.

"Ah shit," he muttered under his breath before looking at Remus cautiously. "Did the walk help at least? Or do you need someone to talk to?"

"No, I'll be fine. I just want to get some sleep now."

Sirius nodded, forcing himself to smile. "All right then."

He took Sirius' face in both hands and kissed him tenderly, while hoping he didn't stink of rancid milk anymore.

"Are you okay?" he asked Sirius afterwards.

"Yeah." He held his gaze. " Now again."

He let Sirius go back into the bedroom and took off his jacket and shoes in silence. Hiding the box under his pullover, he crept up the stairs and hid it in his room, under a pile of socks in the bottom drawer of the commode. Then, after a deep breath, he joined Sirius, lay down next to him in the wide bed and barely had a second of air before he felt Sirius at his side, hugging him and not letting go for the rest of the night.

***

December 4, 1972

I think they suspect something. James, Sirius and Peter. Their questions about the full moon are getting more and more nosy and they won't leave my side in the hospital wing. Sirius keeps staring at my scars, it makes me uncomfortable. I hope they don't find out about it. I don't know how they'll react, maybe they'll abandon me or tell everyone. Then everything Dumbledore has done for me would have been in vain. Maybe he'll have no choice but to kick me out of school. I don't even want to think about it.

***

That had turned out all right. But Remus knew he needed a plan. Now that he was a Death Eater, the meetings and assignments would become more frequent and he couldn't risk Sirius noticing his absence every time. He racked his brains over it all the next day, thinking of strategies, excuses, even thinking of giving Sirius a sleeping potion if it became necessary.

But then, sent from heaven, a clumsy old owl brought him an even better, much more convenient solution. It was a small, unassuming letter, addressed in elegant green writing and the red seal stamped with a Hogwarts logo. It also caught Sirius' attention, who was seated on the floor, leaning sideways against the couch, flicking through a Muggle magazine.

"Oh, mail from Hogwarts?" he commented. "Is that from Dumbledore?"

"Could be," Remus said distractedly, breaking the seal. The letter inside was short, just a few lines of elegantly curved letters:

Dear Mr Lupin,

I am pleased to hear that you are back in good health after the recent incident. I would ask you to come to my office at Hogwarts tomorrow

morning for a brief consultation. There are some aspects I would now like to give further attention to and you could be of great help.

Albus Dumbledore

Somewhat perplexed, Remus lowered the letter and frowned. Dumbledore himself wanted to speak to him?

"What does it say?" asked Sirius curiously, rising and stepping up to the dining table. He peered over his shoulder and Remus held out the letter for him to read.

"He wants to talk to me, I don't know why."

"Hm," Sirius made after finishing reading the letter. "Sounds important."

"Quite."

"Could you imagine what he'd want with you?"

Remus shrugged. "Not a clue."

"Strange." Sirius let the letter sail back onto the table, put his arms on Remus' shoulders from behind and gently kissed the crook of his neck. "Whatever he wants, say you don't feel like it. They're lucky you're still in the Order at all."

Remus smiled. "I'll listen to what he has to say first. Maybe it's something super great."

He felt Sirius' warm breath on his neck. "With a letter like that? That's never a good thing, trust me."

"You're probably right," Remus agreed with him, allowing Sirius to continue caressing his neck. In his mind, however, he was already at Hogwarts.

***

Albus Dumbledore was considerably older than Remus had expected. Long ruffled beard, more wrinkles than could be counted; Remus could hardly imagine that this was supposed to be the legendary wizard who led the Order. But maybe that was why Dumbledore's side was already losing.

"Welcome, Mr Lupin, glad you could find the time," he greeted Remus as he stumbled out of the strange spiral staircase and into his office.

"Hello, Professor," he said, as neutrally as possible. He didn't know what their relationship was like, if they even really knew each other. According to his diary, he had fought to keep him at the school despite his lycanthropy. So Remus had to like him at least a little.

"Sit down." He gestured to the vacant chair in front of his desk. Remus complied, casting a quick glance around the room, seeing the various floors, the cluttered shelves, the phoenix on its perch. He tried not to look too startled.

"Did you find your way here all right?" chattered Dumbledore, and Remus just nodded. He wasn't in the mood for small talk.

"What did you want to see me about?"

Dumbledore regarded him insistently over the lenses of his glasses. "I have a request."

Remus returned the gaze, waiting.

Dumbledore sat up in his chair, "As you are aware, we have a very ... cunning enemy. He uses all the channels he can get. Has gathered a considerable number of allies around him. I'm in the process of breaking down those channels."

"So what?" asked Remus impatiently.

"Well." Dumbledore refused to be ruffled. "One important and exceedingly dangerous channel are his connections to Fenrir Greyback."

"Greyback?" Remus didn't know who that was, but Dumbledore's look told him he should.

"Yes. For a long time he flew under the radar, but in the last few

months he has resumed his activities. And he's more dangerous than ever."

Remus looked at the table as if he needed to think. "And that's where I come in?"

"Right."

"Would you like me to track him down for you?"

Dumbledore nodded. "We know roughly where he's moving. But what we don't know is the size of his pack and the extent of his association with Voldemort. We need to know if he's going to seriously get in our way in the near future."

Remus abruptly realised the implications of this offer. He was supposed to spy for him? Mingle with the enemy and gather information? It cost him a lot of effort to hide his sudden euphoria. Emphatically calm, he asked, "And how do you imagine that exactly?"

"Well, over the next few weeks you will first scout out various packs. Once you've got the scent, mingle with them, spend time with them, find out what you can. And then report back to me. It won't be without danger, that's for sure." He paused for a moment. " Do you think you can do that?"

Remus was sure Dumbledore would take no for an answer. He wouldn't like it, but he wouldn't push him any further either, not after what had happened to him. But Remus would be stupid not to accept this gift, this chance to present Sirius with the perfect excuse for all his absences. And it would be a breeze to come up with any stories to Greyback that satisfied Dumbledore. It was perfect.

"I think so," he said, as if having a hard time deciding. "It's worth a try."

Dumbledore looked pleased. "Glad to hear it. It will be a great help to the Order."

"I certainly hope so," Remus smiled and sat back, satisfied.

After the lengthy conversation with Dumbledore, Remus took some time to get a first impression of Hogwarts before heading back. He was careful not to attract the attention of any students or teachers as

he glanced into the Great Hall and strolled down a few corridors.

So this was where he had spent seven years of his life. All of it obliterated, every detail. It was a strange world, utterly meaningless to him. Remus stepped outside through a tall door, strolling through a long covered bridge that led away from the castle. It was really beautiful, the air was clear, it seemed peaceful. He had probably liked it a lot here.

He leaned against the low railing and looked into the distance, at the large, glittering lake. Somewhere down there on the shore they had taken the picture in the photo album, probably hardly more than a year ago. Unimaginable.

A second later he laughed at himself. He should be glad that his head had been swept clean, no more emotional baggage. Determinedly, he let go of the railing and trudged on, until he could apparate again. He better got out of here fast.

Back in the flat, he was almost scared to death when he saw a huge, black dog standing right in front of him. The dog yelped loudly once and turned back into Sirius in a flash, laughing loudly when he saw Remus' face.

"It always works!" He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. Remus rolled his eyes. He had almost forgotten that Sirius was an Animagus. That was information Voldemort definitely would be interested in.

"Is that the only productive thing you've done today?" Remus put his shoes in the corner.

"Nah, you'd be amazed," Sirius objected, his lofty look on. "I went grocery shopping, did the dishes and cleaned up my mess!"

"Oh my god," Remus acted concerned. "Who the hell are you?"

"The best flatmate in the world." Sirius tossed his hair over his shoulder, which was a little too short for that. But it was probably more about the significance of the gesture.

"And the messiest."

"Not any more! Not when I have such distinguished visitors in my

bedroom, after all."

He winked at Remus, who smiled and let that bounce off him. Best he get it over with now that Sirius was in such a good mood.

"Don't you wanna know how my talk with Dumbledore went?"

"Sure I do." Sirius accompanied him to the dining table where they sat facing each other. "Are you allowed to talk about it?"

Remus thought of how Dumbledore had made him swear not to say a word about his mission. How ridiculous. Why would he risk Sirius suspecting anything by doing shit like that? It was a permanent balancing act as it was.

"Yes, I do. But you mustn't tell anyone. Not even James, understand?"

Sirius swallowed. "That's gonna be tough. But alright then."

Remus thought about the right words for a while, but came to the conclusion that there was no gentle way to break it to him.

"I'm supposed to go into hiding with Greyback's pack and gather information for the Order."

All good spirits drained from Sirius's face, instantly. "What?"

Remus moistened his lips. "Greyback, the werewolf. It seems he's working with Voldemort and gathering other werewolves around him. I' m supposed to mingle with them and gather information that can be of use to us against Voldemort."

Sirius looked at him, stunned. "*The* Fenrir Greyback? The one who made you..."

"Exactly that one."

Apparently.

"You can't do that," he said incredulously, Remus had already expected it. "You turned that down, didn't you?"

Slowly, regretfully, Remus shook his head. "I'm the only one who can do it, Sirius."

Chair legs scraped across the floor as Sirius jumped up and leaned over the table towards him, resting his hands on it. "You've already

done enough for the Order! You've been through more than anyone! Dumbledore's lucky you're still around at all! That's more than enough."

Remus remained emphatically calm, fingers interlocked, gaze lowered. "But if we want to win against Voldemort, I have to do more. Whether I want to or not."

"And what does that involve then? You disappear? Go into hiding, for *days*, with the enemy? And have no way of contacting us in the meantime?"

He nodded. Sirius' hands on the table balled into fists. "This is madness ... this is pure suicide. Greyback is unpredictable, he'll tear you apart, he..." Sirius' voice broke. He sank back into his chair, burying his face in his hands.

A little overwhelmed, Remus leaned over the table and touched Sirius gently on the arm. Roughly, he was shaken off.

"Don't touch me!"

Remus had to admit that he hadn't expected such a violent reaction. A little unsure of what to say, he remained silent, watching Sirius struggle to compose himself. Eventually, he took heart, stood up and walked around the table. But even as he tried to put his hand on his shoulder, he was rudely shaken off. Sirius turned away, slid off the chair, rose shakily and stumbled away.

"Please stay. Let's talk about this."

Snapping back at him like a whip, Sirius shouted, "What do you want us to talk about?! You've already made up your fucking mind, haven't you? So just leave me alone!"

He turned away again and Remus fully expected him to storm out of the house or up the stairs. But as if all tension had gone out of him, Sirius just hung his head and wrapped his arms around himself. It wasn't long before his shoulders began to shake.

"Sirius..." he said, approaching cautiously, as if with a wild animal in a cage.

"Fuck," Sirius said again and Remus saw him wipe his face with his sleeve. "What's wrong with me?" His voice sounded choked, choppy. "I never cried before all this shit. And now... now..."

Remus put his arms around him from behind, hoping not to be pushed away this time. Sirius allowed it, completely absorbed. "Please, Moony, please," he whispered. He went so limp in his arms that Remus feared he would fall if he let go. Carefully, he lowered himself down, along with Sirius, until they were sitting on the floor like a heap of misery.

"It's going to be all right," Remus whispered, hugging Sirius all the tighter.

"Please don't do this, Moony. Don't do this to me. I can't lose you again."

"I'm here. You won't lose me, I promise. I know how to handle werewolves."

Sirius shook his head but said nothing more. Silent sobs shook him and Remus sat them out, thinking of what else he could say to calm him. He whispered sweet nothings into his hair, told him that he didn't have to worry, that he wouldn't lose him. Eventually it had an effect: Sirius calmed down, his shoulders stopped shaking and relaxed. Finally he took a deep breath and Remus inwardly with him.

"I'm sorry," Sirius whispered. "That was pathetic."

"Nonsense," Remus objected. "Don't say that. It's completely reasonable that you're worried. After everything that's happened."

"But 'worrying' doesn't mean having a nervous breakdown."

"Sirius, it's all right." He kissed him on the top of the head and Sirius leaned into the touch. "Don't worry about it. We all have our bad days."

"I'm still waiting for the good ones," Sirius murmured, silent for a moment. Then he turned to Remus. "...Please think this over."

"I will," he lied, stroking Sirius' cheek. Their gazes met, one calm, waiting, the other sorrowful, despairing. In that moment they were so completely different, so completely from other worlds, it was bizarre. Remus let his gaze wander over Sirius' tear-streaked face, the face that was already so familiar to him after this short time. That once again showed him everything about himself, every ugly weakness, every insecurity, every feeling, no matter how deep.

Remus realised, in that very moment, that he was going to destroy

Sirius Black completely. His betrayal would push him into the abyss, leave nothing of him. It was inevitable. And rightly so, he reminded himself redundantly. Still, it made him feel strangely uneasy, a sensation he wanted to get rid of as soon as possible. More on impulse than with any firm intention, he grabbed Sirius' face with both hands and kissed him. Longingly, the kiss was anticipated, greedily returned. Sirius' cheeks were still wet, his lips desperate. It almost felt like this was goodbye already.

Sirius turned further to Remus and clung to him like he was drowning. Remus deepened the kiss, parted Sirius's lips with his tongue and clawed firmly into his hair with both hands. They stayed like that for a while, listening to their heavy breathing, feeling their wildly pounding hearts. Remus felt at ease again. This, this was exactly what he needed right now.

Firmly, he pushed Sirius backwards on the floor. Grasping his wrists, he pressed them beside his head and released the kiss to look at him. Knew that this weak, desperate man was all his, that he could touch him at will, claim him. He had him wrapped around his finger. A good feeling.

Hungrily, he lowered his lips to Sirius's again, felt their soft familiarity. *Not enough,* something inside him rumbled. He wandered down Sirius's neck, pushed aside the collar of his shirt and returned the favour for the hickeys he'd made last time. It elicited a stifled moan from Sirius.

Not enough.

"Upstairs, now," Remus said breathlessly. Sirius didn't argue, rising hastily and following his impatient steps upstairs. It was like **Deja-vu.**

Sirius had barely closed the door behind him when Remus pressed him against it and kissed him hungrily. He couldn't get enough of him, it was crazy. In two quick movements they had stripped off their shirts and tossed them carelessly on the floor. Sirius's skin was warm and soft on his, nestling perfectly against him as if they belonged together.

Sirius pushed him back towards the bed. They fell onto it and continued kissing, on and on, until Remus almost forgot where he was. *Not enough*. He felt an unbearable tightness in his trousers and

saw that Sirius was no different. He pressed their hips together, earning another moan.

"Fuck," Sirius hissed, swallowing with difficulty. Remus looked at him, a thought forming inside him. He leaned down to Sirius's ear and breathed his name. Goosebumps appeared on Sirius's skin.

"Do you want to...?" He didn't even have to continue, Sirius understood. He looked at him with dark eyes, his mouth slightly open, his breathing heavy. Then he nodded, almost as if entranced.

"Yes."

Pleased, Remus ran his thumb over his swollen lower lip. "Good."

He wasted no time, following the greed pulling at his guts. He unzipped Sirius's trousers, pulled them off until he lay, for the first time, completely exposed before him. He looked so fucking good. Remus began to kiss Sirius's belly, trailing his wet trails downwards. His gaze firmly on Sirius's, who fixed him as if hypnotised, he eventually licked over the tip of his erection. That already produced a reaction, Sirius's eyelids closed fluttering and he bit down hard on his lower lip.

Remus continued, watching Sirius's reaction quite closely as he took his cock all the way into his mouth. He felt a slight gagging sensation, but it was controllable. Sirius's hands found their way into his hair, clawing, seeking support. It only encouraged Remus more. He moved his head up and down, took his hand to help, let his tongue wander. It wasn't long before Sirius was just a moaning mess, completely at his mercy. His hands eased away from Remus and clawed at the sheets. His head fell back on the pillow, exposing his throat. Remus continued, until finally Sirius came in his mouth with a soft cry, looking so hot that Remus almost came himself.

He allowed Sirius a few moments to recover before wandering back up to him. It was almost unbearable how much he wanted him now.

"All right?" he asked anyway, hoarsely. Hoped that Sirius was with him even now.

"Yes," Sirius whispered, a small smile on his lips.

"Then open your mouth," Remus said, and he complied instantly. He kissed Sirius briefly on the cheek before sticking two fingers in his mouth. Surprised, Sirius inhaled, but then quickly closed his mouth

around the fingers, making them nice and wet.

"There we go", Remus breathed, waiting impatiently for Sirius to finish. Then he kissed him again, this time on the lips, before moving back down. He pushed Sirius's thighs apart, stroking his butt cheeks with his damp fingers before spreading them. Gently he ran his index finger in small circles around the rim, heard Sirius whimper softly, and then slowly put it in. It was a strange feeling, tight and hot, but Remus quickly got used to it. He moved his finger, watching Sirius's reaction, who *really* seemed to like it. He flipped over, lying sideways next to Sirius, his finger still inside him, but in a way that he had more of him, was closer to him. Sirius welcomed that, leaning towards him, eagerly sealing their lips. Remus added the second finger, widening him slowly, carefully until Sirius was hard again, moaning against his neck.

"Please," he pleaded softly. He busily tampered with Remus's trousers, *finally* freeing his cock and stroking it almost desperately. "Please."

"What?" asked Remus, enjoying seeing Sirius so completely undone. Prompting, he thrust both fingers into him, making him whimper. "What do you want?"

"You...inside me," he got out. Everything else was swallowed by his gasping breath. But that was enough for Remus. He pulled his fingers out and hastily opened the bedside drawer, pulling out a bottle of lube. Generously the spread it on his aching erection and positioned himself between Sirius's legs so that only a few inches separated them.

With one hand Remus gripped his cock, with the other he held Sirius in place. He set and then slowly, carefully began to enter him. Sirius held his breath, his mouth slightly open, his eyes narrowed. Remus continued, pushing in all the way in and then pausing. The heat, the tightness, they were overwhelming. Remus suppressed a gasp and looked at Sirius, who didn't seem to be doing any better.

"Everything... okay?" asked Remus and Sirius nodded erratically.

"Y-yes. But wait... just a moment."

Remus felt the overwhelming desire to move, but he held back until Sirius finally said it was okay. Then he slowly pulled back and thrust into him for the first time. *Oh shit,* raced through his head as he did. *I'm really doing this.*

He started moving, slowly and gently, finding his rhythm. Bent far

over him, Remus watched Sirius, his slightly pained expression and how it changed slightly, with every thrust, into pleasure. When Remus hit the exact right angle, it drew a loud, unabashed moan from Sirius, making his back arch and his thighs shake. He started getting into Remus's rhythm, meeting his thrusts, making sure that he could go even deeper. Remus took up his pace, harshly grabbing Sirius's thigh with one hand and his cock with the other, stroking it at the speed of his movements, driving Sirius out of his mind.

Remus's insides roared with adrenaline, a red storm of white noise. It was all too much, all to fucking perfect. He never wanted it to stop.

"I- I'm-," Sirius gasped, after what felt like eternity and the blink of an eye at the same time. A few moments later he was already coming into Remus's hand and all over his stomach. Remus felt everything contracting around his cock, sending him over the edge as well. With a loud groan he came, letting the orgasm wash over him, and finally collapsed on top of Sirius, completely out of breath.

What followed were a few moments of blissful, wonderful silence. Remus lay on Sirius's chest, feeling his heart pounding and Sirius's hands gently caressing him. Eventually he surrendered, slowly withdrawing from Sirius and lying beside him.

They lay like that for a while, staring at the ceiling, processing what had just happened. Remus felt his senses slowly returning, creeping out of their box where Remus had locked them. It wasn't a pleasant reunion, but he'd already guessed that.

"Remus," Sirius whispered at one point. Remus turned his head, looking at Sirius, his sweaty, red face so close to him, looking so exhausted and sore. But his eyes were clear, looking at him, seeing through him.

"Please don't go." He whispered, intimately. And then, out of nowhere,

"I love you."

Remus's breath caught in his throat. Where the hell did that come from now? He was *not* prepared for that.

He tried his hardest, but he couldn't quite seem to banish his reaction from his face, for Sirius's gentle smile instantly collapsed, the gleam in his eyes gone in an instant.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, embarrassed. "I didn't mean to spring it on you like that."

"No, don't be. It's all good," Remus replied immediately and bridged the distance, pressing Sirius' face gently against his shoulder. It was perhaps not a bad thing if Sirius didn't see his face right now. "You should never apologise for that."

"I don't know what got into me..." murmured Sirius further.

Remus closed his eyes for a moment and collected himself. Then he broke away from Sirius again and looked at him with all the affection he probably needed right now.

"Stop it. You just surprised me a little, that's all. That doesn't mean I don't feel the same way as you. You're my everything."

Liar.

The smile that appeared on Sirius's lips in response was so honest, so wholehearted, that Remus had to close his eyes.

"I'm glad."

I've got to get out of here, I've got to get out of here, Remus heard another familiar mantra rising inside him, but wrestled it down violently. If there was one moment he couldn't leave, this was it. After a fucking declaration of love. He allowed Sirius to keep looking at him like he was the greatest thing in the world. Allowed him to intertwine his hand with Remus's and finally lean his head against his chest. Peaceful, happy.

It was almost unbearable.

Oh, take my hand

Before everything will come to an end

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'All We Are' by Giant Rooks

Sirius bb :(

Thanks for reading!

Btw you may have noticed that I keep changing the total chapter number. That's because I'm still rearranging the final chapters a little. I'm currently working on chapter 54 and although by now I have the ending figured out completely, I'm still moving some scenes around! Just that you are in the know ;)

Next chapter will be up on Tuesday. :*

See ya!

Chapter 14: Repeat After Me

Chapter Notes

One day early! Have fun :D
CWs: None for this one (except for Regulus‘ foul mouth maybe)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

But it’s so hard to sign my own surrender

So hard to do what I’ve intended

So hard to leave what I've defended

So hard to separate what's blended

Regulus was not a very patient person. That was especially not practical when mixing potions, because usually you needed a lot of patience for that. That was also the case with this shitty transformation potion for Lupin that Bellatrix had burdened him with. It took over two days to make, with hours of breaks in between, incredibly annoying. And for what? For allowing the bastard to continue ruining his brother's life. More than once he considered adding some little ingredient just for the fun of it, causing him to get disgusting warts on his face. The thought alone brought him malicious joy. But it was just wishful thinking.

Resignedly, he hung the cauldron over the fire and made sure it was the right height. Actually, he liked potion-making, he was good at it too. But lately, with increasing requests from the Death Eater ranks, for all sorts of dubious occasions, it had become more and more of a liability.

"Regulus, young sir," Kreacher addressed him respectfully as he entered the hazy, darkened room.

"What is it?" he asked, stirring the bluish liquid with a willow stick exactly once in a clockwise direction.

"Young Mr Crouch Junior is visiting, he demands to see you."

Regulus put the stick aside. "Something important?"

"He wouldn't say."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Then send him here."

"Understood, Master, Kreacher will send him right away."

It wasn't a minute before Barty stumbled through the door, waving his hand in front of his nose. "Smells like shit in here!"

"Good to see you too, Barty."

Barty grinned at him and put his hands in his trouser pockets. "Well, what's my favourite member of the Black-Family up to?"

"What's it look like?"

"Stirring up some loser's potency mix again?"

Regulus wished this joke had no kernel of truth. Fervently.

"No, not this time."

Barty walked around the room, looking at the carefully sorted ingredients and tools on the shelves.

"What do you want?" asked Regulus, after Barty made no move to continue.

"You wouldn't happen to have," he began as he leaned against the worktable in an emphatically casual manner. "some more of those sleeping potions left over?"

Regulus looked at him silently for a moment. "Not right now, won't make any again until next week."

"Oh okay." He rubbed the back of his neck. "No problem!"

Regulus didn't comment further. He looked at the clock. In a minute he had to stir again.

"Was that the only reason for your visit?"

Barty shook his head, laughing. "Like that's the only reason I came by! Nah, I'm supposed to let you know that you have to come with me to an assignment tonight."

"Why is that?" Actually, he wasn't due for another few days.

"Came in on short notice. I guess it's nothing wild, we're supposed to spy on a new target."

"Hm." Regulus picked up the willow stick again, his eyes on the clock. "All right. What time do we leave?"

"6 pm."

Twice counterclockwise.

"All right. Where do we meet?"

"You don't know the place yet, I'll just pick you up here."

"Who's it about?"

Barty shrugged. "Some annoying half-blood family, probably causing trouble at the Ministry. McKiddon's their name, or something like that."

"McKinnon?" asked Regulus quietly.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Oh okay." He put the stick down and wiped his hands on his trousers. "Doesn't really ring a bell with me either."

Fortunately Barty believed him.

***

It was a large country house, away from civilisation, on the edge of a small wood. The area seemed idyllic, no noise, no cars, just birds chirping and a few stray cats. A perfect target.

"Can you make out anything?" asked Barty quietly beside Regulus, hidden behind the scraggly trunk of an old poplar tree. Regulus took advantage of the last light the setting sun provided them and fixed on the house and its surroundings.

"Phew hard to tell," he muttered. He had a good eye for this sort of thing, but the distance was a bit too far. "Would have to get a little

closer."

Barty pointed a few metres ahead, towards a thick tree trunk that formed the very edge of the forest. "Let's go there."

Pretty risky, but Regulus didn't disagree. They gave each other a silent signal, then hurried forward, trying not to step through too many withered branches.

"How is it now?" whispered Barty, close beside him. Regulus glanced at the house again. He could make it out now, a slight flicker if he paid attention to the smoke coming out of the chimney.

"A permanent shield, quite strong. It's going to take some Death Eaters to get through that one."

"Shit," Barty whispered. "It was child's play with stupid Dowson. They're learning."

"How do we even know about the house?" Regulus found more visible spots, on the guttering and above the run-down swing set in the backyard. "From the looks of this, the house shouldn't be traceable at all."

Barty glanced at the house as well. "That was probably the new guy, at least that's what Evan said. He's allegedly given us a few addresses, some of them of people we've been looking for forever."

"He's a busy one," Regulus hissed, trying not to sound too bitter.

"Very valuable to us," Barty agreed, "I don't know how the Dark Lord got hold of him, but he does good work."

"Mmm," was all Regulus made.

He felt Barty's sidelong glance at him. "Do you know anything about him? He must have been with you before."

Regulus shook his head. "I don't have a clue who he is. I don't know him." That wasn't even a lie.

Their espionage task also involved uncovering possible activity in and around the house and for the next few hours Barty and Regulus did just that. They visually staked out the perimeter of the shelter, counted the lights that came on after dark and peered through the

windows they could see.

"So there are four people living in the house," Barty summarised at one point. "The parents with two grown-up children. That should be manageable somehow."

"If we can get past the shield, maybe."

"That's going to be a real problem..." Barty fell into thought.

"Yes, but not ours," Regulus waved it off. "That's for Voldemort and his inner circle to deal with, that's what they're there for."

"True." Barty was always so easily convinced.

A few minutes later, just before Barty and Regulus were about to disappear back to Grimmauld Place with their findings, something suddenly stirred in the front garden of the house. Regulus noticed it first, putting his hand warningly on Barty's arm, who immediately ducked behind the tree trunk.

"What do you see?" he breathed to Regulus, who had narrowed his eyes and was trying to make out something in the darkness. Something was moving towards the house. Regulus took another step forward, cautiously.

The front door of the house opened and light flooded into the front garden, illuminating what was hidden. And then he saw him.

"What's wrong, Reg?" hissed Barty, who seemed to realise something was wrong.

Regulus couldn't answer, just stared. He hadn't changed a bit, of course. He hugged the blonde girl who had come out of the door and she invited him inside. And he was not alone. Next to him, just as beautiful as in his memories, stood Lily Evans.

Barty grabbed Regulus by the arm and pulled him roughly backwards. "What's wrong?" he asked him, half worried, half annoyed.

Regulus shook his head, his thoughts slow to get back on track. "Everything's okay."

"Jeez, then say so and don't stand around like a soulless puppet where everyone can see you!"

"Sorry," Regulus muttered. " Are we going back now?"

"Have you recognised anyone?"

"No," Regulus said sharply. "No one. Probably didn't matter either."

Barty sighed surrendered. "Well, if you say so."

This time Regulus wasn't sure Barty believed him.

***

The problem with James was that he was a spark. Regulus couldn't describe it better. Everywhere he appeared, he left his mark, lit a fire, made everyone shine. Regulus had resisted it for a long time, probably longer than anyone else. But no one stood a chance. James was too much, James was too bright. He had gotten through to Regulus even, deep into his dark, withered heart.

Even that brief glimpse from afar had been enough to make him feel the lost warmth again, at least for a small moment. It had set off a chain reaction inside him, long-repressed memories flooding back in, threatening to burn him. He had thought after so many months without him he would be more steadfast. Not yet over him, but at least stable enough to face him, eventually, and not lose his mind in the process.

The evening had taught him otherwise.

The meeting hall was not empty, unfortunately, when Regulus entered it. He had come extra early to have a few more minutes to himself to come to terms with his memories. And then the stupid Rabastan Lestrange sat wide-legged on his chair and dared to grin cheekily at him too.

"Bugger off," Regulus hissed, feeling the two words tugging at him, pulling him back in time.

"Bugger off, Potter!" He didn't have the nerve for a discussion with this dumbass, he was in a bad mood as it was.

"No way," Potter retorted, an annoyingly smug smile on his face. "You probably think you own the fucking Astronomy Tower, but it's meant for everyone. Anyone can be here when there's no class. And your fucking attitude doesn't change that, Black!"

"I work here!" said Regulus, putting his notebook aside and folding his arms. "Why don't you take your fucking nap somewhere else!"

"What are you doing? A little stargazing? Very romantic."

Regulus wanted to punch him in the face. "Why don't you just fuck off. No one needs you here."

Petulant as a toddler, James sat down on the floor and crossed his arms. "You can wait a long time for that, idiot!"

This guy was too much.

"What's got into you?" asked Rabastan piqued, bringing Regulus out of his daydream.

"You're sitting in my seat."

"Oh, excuse me, *sir*. Didn't know this one was labelled."

"What are you doing here anyway?"

Rabastan stood up briskly and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm waiting for my brother. He's been arguing with Bellatrix and Malfoy for ages."

"About what?"

"It's classified." Rabastan grinned wryly. "But it all sounds very exciting. Rodolphus says all the time that we're making good progress!"

"Wonderful," Regulus said dryly, earning a frown in return.

"Well with that mood, I'm sure they're really looking forward to your report."

Regulus smiled sweetly. "You're welcome to wait outside, thank you."

With a snide "Tss," Rabastan turned his back on him and stomped out of the room. At last Regulus was alone.

He dropped heavily into his chair, staring along the far too long table. He didn't want to see anyone anymore today. It was already late and his nerves were on edge. But if he got it over with now, at least he would have peace tomorrow.

Bellatrix and Rodolphus came to the meeting together, Malfoy thankfully staying away from it. They sat down opposite him and looked at him, waiting.

"What were you able to find out?" asked Rodolphus, visibly exhausted from the day.

Regulus cleared his throat and waved his wand, drawing a floor plan of the building in the air with it and began to explain.

"Wow, you're really into stars, aren't you?" said James at one point, after Regulus had spent minutes explaining the lion constellation to which the star Regulus belonged.

"Holy shit!" Regulus rolled his eyes. "What gave me away? Was it the name? Or maybe the fact that I'm up here every night gawking through the telescope?"

"You really do have the exact same type of sarcasm as Sirius, did you know that?"

Like every time James mouthed his brother's name, Regulus winced. "I told you not to compare me to him."

"I'm sorry." James raised his hands apologetically. "Sometimes it's just hard to ignore."

"Do it anyway." Regulus looked at him sternly.

"It's okay." James put on a smile. "I didn't mean to interrupt, go on."

"Do you even care?"

"As long as it' s you telling it, I'm interested in everything."

Regulus blushed and turned his face away.

"So you don't think we can get through the barrier that easily?" summarised Bellatrix after Regulus had finished recapitulating his findings.

He nodded. "It will be difficult. I'm sure there's a way, but I can't think of one that wouldn't require at least a dozen Death Eaters."

"Hmm." Rodolphus seemed to be thinking hard. "Did you learn anything else about the family itself?"

"Four people, two parents, two adult children. Nothing more detailed."

"We should put our spy on it again. I'm sure he can find out more about the family. Then we can decide on our further strategy."

"Which one of them has to die?" asked Regulus casually.

Rodolphus regarded him. "The mother, definitely. She causes us great trouble in the Ministry, is too curious for her own good."

"The children too can die for all I care," Bellatrix sneered. "The father is a disgusting muggle. We're doing the world a favour with that."

"I see," was all Regulus said.

"Where did you get that from, anyway? All that 'pureblood' talk? Deep down you know that's just bullshit, don't you?"

Regulus didn't feel like arguing, lying too comfortably against James' shoulder, about to doze off.

"James, don't."

James didn't let it. "It just doesn't make sense either. What does the blood

say about your abilities anyway? Look at Lily, she's Muggle-born and better than me in about every subject."

"James." Sometimes, though, he just wouldn't stop talking.

"I'm serious Reg, this isn't like you at all. You're so smart, how can you believe something like that?"

Regulus groaned in annoyance and lifted his head from James' shoulder. "I actually came here to rest, not to have philosophical discussions."

James gave him an annoyed sideways glance. "This isn't philosophy, Reg. There's a position here that's clearly the right one. And it's not yours."

Regulus bit his tongue. He didn't want to start another argument. But James was just so damn stubborn sometimes.

"Not today. I've had a long day. Let's talk about it another time."

James looked displeased. But ultimately he sighed in surrender and put his arm around Regulus' shoulders. "Fine by me. But next time, I'm not letting up."

"I didn't expect you to."

"Everything okay?" asked Rodolphus, frowning, and Regulus nodded hastily.

"Do you have any other questions?" He cleared his throat and was relieved to see them both shaking their heads.

"Then we shall remain as we are. You will pass the results to the Dark Lord and he will decide if we should send the spy after the family again."

"Exactly so," Rodolphus agreed and rose with Bellatrix. "Thanks for the summary. You're doing a good job lately."

"You're welcome." He inclined his head and kept it that way until they had both left the room. Only then did he allow himself to take a breath. Done.

Quickly he walked back to his room, his safe haven. All the while he

stubbornly looked at the floor, forcing himself into tunnel vision so that nothing distracted him.

The problem with James was also that just about everything reminded Regulus of him. Even in the yellowed wallpaper he found a fucking pattern that looked like his birthmark under his left shoulder blade. Even his worn doorknob reminded him of the fucked-up door to the Room of Requirement where he had spent so many days and nights with him. He could not escape it.

Finally he sat on his bed, hands clasped in his lap as if he were just a guest. Let it all wash over him, hoping that it would be over then. Only after half an eternity did he relax again and let himself fall backwards onto the bed. The ceiling was high, just like the one in the Room of Requirement. But the ceiling there had felt more like home than this one.

And the last, biggest problem with James was that he was right. About everything. Regulus would never have admitted it to him, of course. But at least after his breakdown a few weeks ago, where he had looked at himself so angrily in the mirror and sworn to himself that it couldn't go on like this, he couldn't deny it anymore. James had been right.

Regulus couldn't buy anything from that realisation, though. It came too late. He only had to look at himself. He had made a big noise after his first murder and now he continued just as before. But he also just didn't know a way out, was too deeply tangled in the dark arts. And even if he found one, would he even have the courage to pursue it? Everyone knew he was a coward.

Regulus put the back of his hand on his forehead and continued to look at the ceiling, lost in thought.

Oh James, he thought bitterly, *I could use your help.*

***

Regulus had actually been looking forward to a peaceful day. He had grabbed a couple of Potions books from the considerable in-house collection and planted himself in the old, dusty armchair in the corner of the library, where he hoped to have a few quiet hours.

But then, barely 15 minutes after he had started, none other than fucking Remus Lupin came stomping into his comfort zone, lanky, determined and with that perpetually bored-looking expression on his face. Instantly his mood was spoiled.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, lowering his book.

Lupin eyed him curiously. "I've come to collect my vials," he said.

"The first batch should last you until at least the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, but I can't get away that often, at least not yet." Lupin looked impatient. "And the Dark Lord insisted on seeing me today, about something. I want to cover it all together right away."

Regulus flipped the book closed. "Fine by me," he muttered. "You're lucky I've already finished the potion." He rose and patted the dust from his clothes.

"Do you have any way to change the taste of the potion? It's really disgusting," Lupin commented as he followed Regulus downstairs.

"No, I haven't."

And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you for any money in the world.

"Too bad."

Regulus led Remus into the small room, earning the same reaction as always.

"Phew, what a stink," Lupin gasped, his face contorting.

"Don't be a pussy, it's not that bad." Regulus went to his work table where he had the twelve vials lying ready.

"Did you bring the box?"

Remus took it out of his jacket pocket. "I took the remaining two out."

Regulus accepted it and flipped it open.

"Have you had any side effects so far?", he asked as he carefully placed the vials inside.

"Uh, no," Lupin began. "So not that I know of."

"Okay. Let me know if anything comes up."

Lupin hesitated. "Didn't know that was possible."

"What?" Regulus looked at him in irritation. "Side effects?"

"Yes." Regulus noticed he looked a little tired.

"Sure. Can always be side effects, though rare with proper brewing."

He handed the filled box back to Lupin and he hastily accepted it.

"One more question," Lupin added, unusually hesitant by his standards.

"What?" Regulus made no secret of his impatience. He had better things to do than chat unnecessarily long with this psychopath.

"You know about potions, don't you?"

"No shit. Where did you get that idea?"

Regulus saw anger flash in his eyes, but he swallowed it down. "I have a question. Just out of interest."

"What?"

"Let's say I needed some information. Information that I've forgotten, but that I now need again. How would I get it?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Lupin sighed in resignation and ran a hand through his hair. " I've got a problem. The Order introduced control questions a few days ago. They ask super personal shit like 'what colour was my first owl?' I've managed to avoid it so far, but if they ask me anything like that... I'm fucked."

Regulus couldn't help his sneer. "So you're telling me that Voldemort's paragon is about to be busted only because the Order took a teeny security precaution for once?"

Lupin glowered at him angrily. "It's not my fault. The Dark Lord said my memory loss was just a side effect of the treatment. There must be some way to reverse that then."

"Forget it. There's no way. But why don't you go and ask your great

hero Voldemort about it, maybe he can help you out."

Lupin shook his head vigorously. "I don't want him to know about this, it's embarrassing enough."

"Oh, but you trust me not to tell anyone?"

Lupin had no answer to that. That jerk.

"Buzz off. I can't help you. Don't want to, if I'm honest. This transformation potion is eating up enough of my time."

"Almost figured as much, just forget it." Lupin looked at him contemptuously, turned on the spot and stomped out of the room. Regulus didn't look after him.

There was no cure spell for amnesia, he knew that. He was not yet as familiar with the dark arts as he perhaps should be in his position, but it would certainly have come to him. For sure.

Still, the thought wouldn't quite let him go. He returned to the library, but instead of sitting back in his chair, he wandered through the shelves, not quite sure what exactly he was looking for.

But assuming, theoretically, that there was the possibility of restoring at least a part of the memories. That would mean that... That would imply the possibility that....

Regulus crouched down and searched the bottom shelf. The books there had probably not been given a glance for years and they would probably fall apart at the first touch. Regulus scanned the titles:

Nightshade Spells

Body Swap

Undetectable Poisons

The History of Unforgivable Curses

Oblivion Spells

Regulus reached for the last book and carefully pulled it from the shelf. He almost didn't think he would find anything on the subject of memory recovery, but he was proven wrong:

Oblivion spells cannot be reversed. Memories taken with dark magic are considered lost forever, every user should be aware of that. However - and this is my very personal opinion - I certainly assume that at least some things - especially impressive core memories - could be restored through long-term, continuous stimulation of the brain. Probably not in the original form, probably utterly incomplete. But my mind steadfastly resists the assumption that something can disappear without leaving even the slightest trace.

That was all it said. Regulus read the paragraph several times. *Long-term, continuous stimulation of the brain?* What was that supposed to mean? That's what he always hated about those ancient books, that vague rambling. But according to the author's opinion, it shouldn't be impossible. Regulus thought for a long time, far too long. At some point his knees began to ache and he sat down on the dusty floor. Slowly, ponderously, hesitantly, an idea formed in his mind. Took shape, finally made Regulus' pulse spike.

This could be... this could be something.

He had to get back to work, now. Hastily, he shoved the book back into the shelf, already half-jumped when he bumped his elbow against the opposite shelf and some books sailed to the floor. Impatiently, he put them back, his mind already completely elsewhere. But the last book in his hands made him pause, for some reason. It was old, ancient. The cover was black leather, worn. The title was just one word, stamped in white capital letters on the front.

Horcruxes.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Repeat after Me' by KONGOS

Hope you liked it. Next chapter will be a whole new PoV!

See ya! :*

Chapter 15: Only For A Moment

Chapter Notes

CW: Minor Character Death, Depiction of Disease, Grief

So, uploading two chapters at once this time! They're both rather short and from the same perspective, so I thought I'd just put them out in one go :). Especially this one felt more like an interlude while writing, something not quite integrated into the main story-line but nevertheless essential to James's character and development.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And I try, oh, I try

To pretend that I'm fine

Tell me why, oh, tell me why

I need you by my side

Life was not fair.

James Potter would never have heard himself say something like that two years ago. He, the rich, well-protected only child, kissed by happiness, without worries, without hardships. He was doing well. Nothing could have dimmed him.

But sometimes a patronus was enough. One Patronus, one message, and nothing was the same anymore.

"How are you?", Lily asked him softly, taking his hand. She looked beautiful in her bright dress, only her worried expression didn't quite want to fit in.

He smiled reassuringly at her. "It's all right." *Liar.*

"Shall we go in?" The worry didn't fade from her face.

"Sure, I'm ready." *Liar.*

Lily squeezed his hand and gently stroked his cheek. "I'm with you."

James couldn't take her gaze any longer, looking past her to the entrance of the hospital. There didn't seem to be much going on, thankfully. James couldn't stand people right now.

"I know." He tried to take heart and take the first step, but he couldn't, his legs were rooted to the spot. He had to wait until Lily did, until she went ahead and gently pulled him along with her, like it was his first day of school.

It was Lily who asked at the registration desk for the floor and room number, it was she who showed him the way. Arriving at the door, she put her hands on his shoulders reassuringly.

"Everything's going to be fine, okay?"

Before James could lie any further, the door opened behind her and an older physician stepped out. He paused when he saw them, and his gaze lingered on James.

"James Potter?" he asked, glancing briefly at the file that floated obediently beside him.

He nodded, unable to speak.

"How are they?" asked Lily instead.

The physician looked to her. "And you are?"

"Lily Evans. His girlfriend." She pointed at James.

He nodded. "Would you follow me? We should have a private talk."

James nodded again and followed the physician, but not without giving a long drawn out look at the closed door before.

He led them into his office, a small, sparsely furnished room with not much more than a desk and a couple of folding chairs. James took a seat on one of them and looked at the physician, waiting. Lily moved close to him and gently leaned her shoulder against his. It helped.

"So, Mr Potter, glad you could come in so quickly," the physician began busily, fishing the file out of the air and flipping it open. "Perhaps right away, your parents are stable so far."

James stared at the physician's fingers, which he had clamped

between the pages to flick back and forth quickly. "As of now, I can't make any firm statements about the further course of the disease." He raised his gaze, serious. "However, I don't want to sugarcoat anything either: I haven't seen such a severe case of dragon pox in a long time, with both of them. It's going to be very tough."

"But how did it appear so suddenly? We were with them just two days ago, they seemed fine then," Lily asked incredulously.

The physician nodded. "They probably didn't notice some of the early signs. They often resemble a mild cold. And once the illness breaks out, the health usually deteriorates rapidly."

James thought back to their visit, to how their mother's voice had sounded a little occupied and his father had complained of tiredness. He hadn't thought anything of it, the way he never thought about anything.

"But what do you think the chances are that... everything will be alright?" Lily's words echoed in James' ears.

The physician seemed to be thinking, not a good sign. "There's always a chance. I've seen a lot in the last 20 years. But as I said, these are two very serious cases. And dragon pox is very insidious, especially for the elderly."

The more the physician talked, the more numb James became. He didn't want to hear this, not so matter-of-factly rattled off as if it was just another mundane, inevitable death. He couldn't bear it.

"Are... are they awake?" he brought out, his voice sounding raspy.

"Yes, probably. They've had a lot of painpotions, though, so they're a bit slow."

"Can I see them?"

The physician flipped the file closed. "You can, yes. We have treated the dragon pox to the point where it is no longer contagious. But please note that any touch will cause them great pain."

Without another word, James rose and stomped out of the office, suddenly all the energy in him that he had been missing before. Lily could barely keep up.

The room smelled of ointments and herbs. The air was stuffy, far too warm and yet the first thing James noticed was his mother shivering violently.

It was not a pretty sight. Her pox was a piercing red that stood out against her otherwise greyish scabbed skin. It covered her whole body, down to the tips of her fingers. His father, in the bed next to her, looked no better.

Although they both had their eyes open, they didn't seem to notice James' and Lily's presence at all. It was only when James sat down between them and cautiously raised his voice that they turned to him in wonder.

"James? Oh darling, I'm so glad you're here," his mother said cheerfully, though her voice broke twice at those few words.

"Hello, Mum," James said, having to resist the urge to hug her. She was in enough pain as it was.

"How are you?" his father asked quietly, as if it was James who was currently seriously ill in bed.

He felt tears in his eyes, looked at the ceiling for a moment and then tried desperately to muster a smile. "Oh, I'm fine." He swallowed with difficulty. "And how are you?"

"Oh, honey, we' ll be fine," his mother replied. "Please don't worry about it. It looks worse than it is."

"Okay." James nodded slightly and felt Lily's gaze on him. He didn't return it.

"Euphemia and I have gotten through very bad things before, you know that, my boy," his father added.

"Yes," James said, struggling more and more to hold back his tears. He just wanted to hug them and never let go. "I know."

Even during the short time James was there, their condition continued to deteriorate. His father's breathing became increasingly rattling and his mother's chills intensified as well. James fetched her several extra blankets but it didn't seem to help.

"Oh, it's really cold today," she croaked at one point after James had poured her some warm soup.

"Yes, very cold," James agreed with her, staring at the rays of sunlight falling on their bed.

The longer he stayed, the less he wanted to leave. It was becoming more and more obvious, the direction they were heading. James clung to every second he had left with them.

"James," Lily whispered to him gently at one point, her hand on his back feather light. "Do you want me to call Sirius? He should also ... know."

James nodded. "He should come over."

Lily hurried out of the room, leaving James alone. He looked at his father, who by now had fallen into a fitful sleep, and then at his mother, who continued to shiver as if it were the dead of winter. She looked so changed, was so much less than James knew her to be. Missing was the all-encompassing warmth and love in her face that James could always be sure of, no matter what, no matter how bad he was feeling. He couldn't bear to see that disappear.

"Mum, can I give you a hug?" asked James over his guilty conscience.

"But of course, darling."

He was gentle, as gentle as he could be, but he still saw how painful it was for her. He quickly let go of her again and stroked her face. "Do you need anything?"

She looked at him, her gaze dull. "No, I'm fine. Please don't worry about me. I'll be fine." She managed a small smile. "We just have to firmly believe in it."

James' gaze blurred. He blinked and the first tears rolled down his face.

"I will."

Liar.

***

They died two days later. It was a mild April morning, warm with spring, barely a cloud in the sky. His mother had always loved this time of year. It would have been the perfect day to shoo his father out of his chair and spruce up the garden with him. They would weed, plant vegetables, all without the aid of magic, simply because it was fun. They had always enjoyed the little things.

But now they were gone. And had taken all the joy with them.

In the days that followed, it was as if James saw everything through a veil. Everything was a little darker, everything was a little less beautiful. Everything felt numb. There were many tears, especially from Lily and Sirius, who had loved his parents almost as much as he did. There were countless condolences, even more pats on the back, and most of all, there were pitying looks. 'Poor James,' they said, 'to lose both parents so young.'

'It must be hard for him.'

Loss was not really foreign to James. He knew what it felt like to have it rip you apart from the inside. But knowing it didn't make it any easier, on the contrary. When old wounds ripped open, they bled all the more profusely.

The funeral was the worst part. He wouldn't have made it through without Lily. She took care of all the affairs, the coffins, the headstone, the burial ceremony. She kept everything running while he wandered around his parents' house looking for them. She was his salvation.

After the funeral, a few more guests were invited to his parents' house, for the funeral feast. Almost the entire order was there, as they had been at the funeral. But during the whole thing, James had been so out of it that he had hardly noticed. Now, with enough distance from that blasted graveyard in Godric's Hollow, clarity was slowly returning. And the pitying looks bored into him all the deeper.

"Hey James." Peter appeared beside him, his voice timid. James had been standing in front of the wall for fifteen minutes, staring at the family picture. It had only been a matter of time before someone took

pity on him.

"Hey Pete," James said, watching his father brush through his younger self's hair.

"How are you?" asked Peter cautiously.

"Good."

"Uh, um, yeah, okay."

"How are you? How's Grace?"

Peter seemed overwhelmed. "Yeah, um. I'm okay too... considering. Grace is fine, she sends her condolences."

"Thanks." His mother's hair really shone in the picture.

"Do you want to come outside? Get some fresh air? The weather's great."

James was going to decline at first, but then he thought better of it. It was a good way to escape the stares. "Sure."

Peter looked relieved. "Great." Together they stepped outside through the open patio door, where the sun shone pleasantly on James' face. He stretched his face towards the sky and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Prongs," he heard beside him at some point and opened them again. Sirius was there, looking at him lovingly, eyes red but a smile on his lips. He took his hand. "Come on, let's sit down for a bit." He gestured to the small bench a few paces away, from which all the splendour of Euphemia Potter's garden could be seen.

James looked back inside. "I don't know, I should get back, all the guests..." he stuttered, as if he had thought about the guests even once throughout the day.

Sirius shook his head. "I told Remus to take care of everything. You're a free man."

Somewhat hesitantly, he let Sirius pull him to the bench and took a seat beside him. For a moment they were silent, breathing in the warm air that smelled of grass and pollen.

"So beautiful," Sirius whispered.

James just nodded, even though he knew the garden hadn't even unfolded its full beauty yet. Buds were pushing everywhere, the tulips were even blooming already. But the roses, the lilies, all the centrepieces, they still needed time. They would probably bloom for the last time this year.

Sirius squeezed his hand. "Summers at your place were always the best. I've never felt so welcome anywhere else."

"You *were* always welcome."

Sirius smiled at him. "Especially after I ran away. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had you and your parents."

"What went without saying. You're family."

"No, James, it's not for granted. I know what I'm talking about." He took a deep breath. "You saved me. And I will be forever in your debt."

"They wouldn't want that."

"No," Sirius agreed. "But I think there are many things they wouldn't want." Sirius gave him a long look.

"Yeah." James knew what Sirius was getting at, but he didn't want to hear it.

After that, they lapsed into silence again, until Sirius suddenly started laughing softly. Irritated, James looked at him.

"Remember that time in the summer when we had that scuffle and you fell into that bush over there?" asked Sirius, pointing to one of the particularly thorny rose bushes. James nodded, everything inside him tightening at the memory alone. "Oh god, yes. I was still pulling thorns out of my ass two weeks after that."

"And the look on Euphemia's face when she saw what you did to her roses!" Sirius chuckled. "That was priceless."

"I was really afraid for my life. She's really not to be messed with when it comes to things like that." He grimaced. "...Was."

Sirius didn't let that faze him. "No, when it came to her babies, she could become the most dangerous witch in all of southern England." Sirius nudged him in the side with his elbow.

James smiled. "Now you're exaggerating, Pads."

"I would never." He winked. And went on, unpacking story after story, each funnier and more heartwarming than the last. James had no choice but to be pulled along step by step. Eventually, a few stories came to his mind, even some that Sirius didn't know yet. Their quiet giggles and smirks soon turned into boisterous laughter and even though James' tears kept coming, he felt almost light as the sun was already slowly approaching the horizon and the first guests were saying goodbye. For the first time in days, he felt like he could breathe again.

"That's how we should remember them," Sirius said at one point, his gaze fixed on the distance. "Like this and nothing else."

James just nodded. He didn't want to think of their gruesome end, not of what he would now miss forever. It wouldn't do them justice.

Later, when presumably all the guests had left, an exhausted looking Lily, along with Peter and Remus came out and joined them. They didn't speak, just were there, as was Sirius, at his side. He couldn't have told them at that moment how much it meant to him. They were everything to him, his second family.

And as long as he had them, he could endure anything.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Only For A Moment' by Lola Marsh

Hope you liked it :)

See ya!

Chapter 16: Missing

Chapter Notes

CWs: None :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I no longer want to know how it was

I no longer want to know why it's over [...]

I let you go like a coward

And I wait for a signal

Just one last time, but it won't change a thing

'Cause I know it'll never be the same

It's nighttime, I'm awake and I'm thinking of you

James stared at the sealed letter in his hands. His fingers were shaking so violently that he could barely read his own address on the envelope. There was no return address on the back, but he knew it anyway. He knew the writing, knew who wrote his name in a way that it looked like a work of art. He just couldn't believe it.

The owl had simply thrown the letter at him, along with his daily newspaper and an advertisement for the new Quidditch Museum in London. At first he hadn't even noticed it, had wanted to throw it away. But now, just a little later, he was locked in the bathroom, almost having a nervous breakdown.

"James?" Lily knocked gently on the door. "Are you going to be done soon? Sirius and Remus should be here any minute."

James cleared his throat. "Er, yes! Just a minute!"

He stuffed the letter under his shirt and took one deep breath. All was well. Everything was perfectly fine. There was an explanation for this. And it was probably very simple.

After regaining his composure somewhat, he unlocked the door and

faced a suspicious-looking Lily.

"Is... everything okay?"

James beamed at her. "I'm fine! I guess it's just something about lunch didn't agree with me."

Lily hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Alright, whatever you say." She walked past him into the bathroom. "Can you go downstairs and put the tea on?"

James nodded, his most engaging smile on. "Sure, honey."

As soon as Lily had closed the door, James hurried into the small guest room, the room he least expected Lily to enter anytime soon. He frantically looked around, searching for a suitable hiding place, and finally found it by the decorative books that stood on the dresser, neatly lined up and supported on the sides by small angles of wood. The letter was so thin that James could just slide it between two books without it making any difference. Having it out of sight felt like twenty pounds falling off his shoulders. He wasn't ready to open it yet. And looking at his physical reaction, he didn't think he ever would be.

He quickly left the guest room again and hurried to the kitchen, put on the tea as announced and waited impatiently for the water to get hot. He preferred to heat the water magically himself, it was quicker and more effective, but Lily insisted he use her weird muggle stuff now and then. He had stopped arguing with her about it.

Just as the water was boiling, the doorbell rang. James locked any lingering absentmindedness deep inside him and prepared for the stormy greeting he knew was coming. It had been nearly three weeks since the funeral and he hadn't seen Sirius since. Surely a crime in his eyes.

"Prongs! Thought you weren't even going to open!" exclaimed Sirius exuberantly, falling around his neck.

"Darling, what do you think of me?!" he quipped as Sirius almost crushed him. They loosened their hug and Sirius smiled at him, honestly, even though he looked somewhat exhausted.

"Good to see you!"

"Good to see *you*!"

Politely, Remus pushed Sirius aside and hugged him too, a little less stormily. "I'm glad it finally worked out!"

"Yes, after so many announcements, it was really overdue."

After the hug, James stepped aside and let his friends enter. Sirius hurriedly slipped off his shoes and left them messily, while Remus placed his neatly beside them.

"Do you want a little tour first, Remus? You've never even been here before," he offered.

"Sure thing," Remus said quickly, and Sirius nodded as well.

"I have to warn you though, the flat obviously can't compete with yours. It only has one floor."

"Don't worry, we like to put up with the poorer folk from time to time. It grounds you," Sirius said patronisingly and James just shook his head. "You're welcome to wait here, Pads, not that you're going to get overwhelmed by it."

"I would never leave Moony alone in this, what do you think of me?"

James ignored Sirius and, turning to Remus, gestured towards the kitchen. "Let's start here."

They entered the small square room, consisting of a fitted kitchen with a white front and wood-look worktop, and a small dining table with two chairs.

"What's that?" asked Sirius, pointing next to the fridge.

Remus pre-empted James, "That's a microwave, Sirius."

It drew a laugh from James. "Moony, you really should introduce him to the Muggle world more, Lily has done wonders for me."

"But where do I start?"

"Hey!" protested Sirius, "I know a lot about Muggles! At least about the parts I'm interested in!"

"So music and motorbikes?" asked Remus dryly.

"Among other things!"

"What else?"

James grinned to himself as Sirius faltered. "Er, well..."

"Oh right," Remus took over for him, "ready-made pizzas."

Sirius crossed his arms theatrically. "Always those side blows, Moony!"

Remus just shook his head and turned to James, who was having a really good time. "Shall we continue?"

"With pleasure." James inclined his head and led Remus on, through the living room, to their bedroom and the small guest room. Just at the latter, he stopped short, avoiding looking towards the dresser. As they finished, Lily came out of the bathroom, some make up and mascara on, smiling broadly.

"Hi there," Sirius said warmly, giving her a big hug. "You look beautiful as usual."

"Oh, you charmer," Lily grinned and James stifled a feigned indignant comment, seeing that she was genuinely happy. Some things you could just leave like that.

She greeted Remus too and then looked at James. "Are you showing Remus around?"

James nodded. "Only the bathroom is left to do."

They caught up and finally returned to the living room where they settled on the couch and James heated the water again and poured the tea.

"And what do you say, Moony?" he asked him after he had served the tea and settled down last.

Remus nodded appreciatively. "Pretty. But I suppose Lily did most of the decorating?"

Lily raised an eyebrow. "You bet she did."

"Hey. I helped too."

"Helped with what?" she asked, and James' indignation made Sirius snort.

"Ha! Now you know what that feels like!"

James clutched his chest theatrically. "It's always the closest allies stabb..."

Lily wasn't impressed by the show. "Well each to their own, honey."

Sirius laughed even louder.

They chatted all afternoon. The topics kept emphatically shallow, everyone clearly trying to be in a good mood. James knew they were doing it because of him, because sometimes he still got unusually quiet and lost in thought. He was grateful to them for that. That he didn't have to hear about the Order for a while, nothing about the war. Playing pretend while everything around him was falling apart. It suited James.

And even though he was preoccupied a lot, he noticed that Sirius and Remus were acting a little strangely. Remus seemed restless, taking unusually frequent trips to the bathroom, or letting his eyes wander around the living room. Sirius, on the other hand, looked glum. He didn't display it obviously, but James knew him well enough to recognise it anyway. He learned the reason when Lily asked her next question.

"Well, what's on your agenda for the next few days? Lots of shifts?"

Sirius just shrugged and glanced at Remus. The latter shook his head, hesitantly. "Not really. I've been given a special assignment by Dumbledore, I'm setting off for it for the first time tomorrow."

"What kind of special assignment?" asked James curiously.

Remus smiled apologetically at him. "Can't tell you, I'm afraid. Had to promise him."

"Sounds dangerous," Lily muttered, not sounding at all enthusiastic. "So soon after ...?"

Remus nodded. "I wanted it that way. I can handle it."

James watched Sirius stare at his lap, jaw muscles tense.

"And how long will you be gone?"

Remus considered. "Two to three days I guess, not super long. Gotta get... settled in first."

"So you'll have to go more often?" James continued to look at Sirius as he spoke to Remus. "Is this something long term?"

Remus replied, casually, "Probably, yes. Depends a bit on how successful I am."

Lily crossed her arms. "Have you thought this through? Don't put yourself through too much. You should still be taking it easy."

Remus looked determined. "I've been taking it easy these past few weeks, almost a little too much. It'll do me good to get out again."

James didn't like the idea either. Whatever Remus was doing for Dumbledore, it certainly wasn't without danger.

"Whatever you say," Lily finally concluded sullenly, also probably because she didn't want to dampen what should have been a good mood. For James' sake.

A short, awkward silence followed, which Remus finally ended with, "Where can I smoke at your place?"

"Just outside the front door. You can leave the door ajar."

"All right," Remus said and rose. Sirius watched him for a moment before he too stood up hurriedly and muttered. "I'll have one too."

"Remus is a bad influence on you!" quipped James, but it didn't draw a smile from Sirius.

"Don't worry, there's still a long way to go before I smoke as much as he does."

And then they were both gone. Lily and James exchanged glances.

"Kind of weird today, aren't they?", Lily spoke exactly his thoughts.

James nodded. "This *assignment* seems to be a red flag. Looked like they'd been arguing about it too."

"But I completely understand Sirius," Lily added. "Remus shouldn't be so careless. He probably doesn't realise how much we all worry."

James nodded, thoughtful. He didn't like it, this tension between his

best friends. It didn't suit them.

They were silent for a while, then Lily suddenly drew her wand and pointed it at one of the empty teacups. In one elegant movement she waved it and James watched in awe as the cup turned into a round ashtray. She took it and handed it to James.

"Could you please take this to them? I don't want them to ash all over the floor."

"Right, I could have thought of that." James took the ashtray, rose and hurried to the front door, which had been pushed open a little by the wind. For a brief moment he watched the two of them through the gap, standing with their backs to him, looking up at the cloudy sky. Just as he was about to grab the doorknob and raise his voice, he saw Sirius turn to Remus and whisper something. Remus nodded and turned to Sirius as well, his gaze indistinct. After a second, Sirius suddenly stretched towards him and .... gave him a kiss.

There was nothing exciting about it, nothing impulsive or hectic. It looked natural, like it was the most normal thing in the world for them. One of a hundred previous kisses. James stared at them, certainly for several seconds, trying to process what he had just seen. In the meantime, they had already turned away again and continued to smoke silently as if nothing had happened.

Sirius and Remus were a couple.

The thought roared through his body like a roll of thunder.

A couple.

Mechanically, he smiled, pushed the door closed again a little, then emphatically turned the knob loudly. It worked, the two of them turned, casually backing half a step away from each other. James acted as if he had momentum, as if he had just come rushing over.

"Here's an ashtray for you," he handed it to Sirius, who used it directly to flick his ashes into it. "Thank you, Prongs."

"You're welcome." James tried not to stare too hard.

"...You okay?" Remus looked at him questioningly as he took a long drag from his cigarette.

"Sure, sure thing." He gestured to the door, "I'll wait inside until you're

done."

Remus turned his head to avoid blowing the smoke in James' direction. " See you in a minute then."

James all but stormed back into the flat, leaning the front door again and taking a brief moment. Everything was threatening to come crashing in on him, the great, oversized certainty of what he had just seen. The implications, everything it entailed.

They hadn't told him.

A sharp twinge went through his chest and he hated himself for it in the next moment. There would be reasons, they certainly weren't doing this because they didn't trust him enough....

Or were they?

"James, what's wrong?" Lily thankfully dragged him out of his thoughts before he got too lost in them. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

James grinned, it was what he did best. "All good." *Get a grip.*

Artfully he sat back on sofa, waiting for them to return, trying not to look too strange. But he couldn't help it, when they returned and sat down again, he had to stare at them. His two best friends were a couple. And even though they were sitting on the corner couch only a few inches away from him, the distance between them and James felt huge all of a sudden.

Remus and Sirius seemed to notice that James was acting differently. That was probably why they announced their departure relatively soon after. James nodded it off, almost glad of it. After a few 'nice to meet you"s and 'see you soon"s, they finally left and disapparated. James breathed a sigh of relief.

"Sure everything's okay?" asked Lily, her eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, of course," James affirmed. "But I think I need to go to the bathroom again. Lunch, you know..."

"...All right. I can make you another tea if it helps your stomach."

"Good idea, thanks darling," James said, kissing her fleetingly. "Be

right back."

And with that, he stomped off towards the bathroom. For the second time that day, everything seemed to be getting too much for him.

The bathroom door closed and locked behind him, he leaned against it for a moment and took a deep breath. Then, annoyed with himself, he broke away and stepped up to the sink, looking at himself in the mirror.

What the fuck is your problem?, he asked his reflection angrily. *So what, they're a couple! They are wonderful together! They have always been inseparabl*e!

His reflection looked miserable, like a child left behind.

They don't want you to know. Because they don't trust you enough. You're not Sirius's closest friend anymore.

He almost laughed out. *You're the last person who gets to hold that against them. You slept with Sirius's brother, you fucking idiot. And you didn't tell him to this day. You have no right to be disappointed or angry with him.*

His reflection went wide-eyed, panic rising in it as he suddenly remembered the letter.

No, this is about your best friends, nothing else!, he forced his schizophrenic conversation back on track.

For a few minutes this went back and forth, he had this pathetic dialogue with himself and kept coming to the conclusion that, whether justified or not, he was hurt.

Was he really not trustworthy enough? Did they think that he would not accept it? Had he ever said anything like that? He doubted himself more and more.

This time Lily didn't knock on the door, but he knew she was waiting impatiently for him. So at some point he forced himself to pull it together and not be such a whiny wimp. He splashed some cold water on his face and tried to smile. That, too, hurt.

Lily didn't say anything else when he came back, just put the tea out for him and snuggled up to him on the couch once he was settled. She always seemed to know when he needed her closeness.

They didn't talk much until the evening. They cooked together, ate, did the dishes. After a short walk, they got ready for bed. In bed they began to kiss and James clung to her closeness, as if he tried to catch himself from falling. It was wonderful, freed his mind, soothed him. Afterwards he held Lily in his arms and she dozed off quickly, warm and soft. But James still couldn't sleep, no way. At some point, in the middle of the night, he gently peeled himself out of the embrace and got up, pulling on his pyjama bottoms. He didn't quite know what he was doing, not until he finally found himself, half in a daze, in the guest room, right in front of the dresser.

This is a bad idea, he scolded himself, and reached for the letter anyway. The writing was so beautiful, like calligraphy. James had always admired it. Completely fixated on the letter, he sat down on the floor, leaning his back against the dresser. And before he could reproach himself further, he followed an impulse and tore open the seal. Hectically, as if he had only a few seconds before the paper dissolved, he unfolded the letter and stared at it, his thoughts completely paralysed.

There was only one sentence there. And yet it took James several minutes before he managed to read it.

James, I'm so sorry about your parents.

After all these months, after all the tears, all the guilt, this was the only thing James got. He lowered the letter, his breath rasping. That was it.

Following another violent impulse, he tore the letter into small shreds. He flung what was left in his hands at the end, wanting it as far away from him as possible. First he ruffled his hair, hit the floor with his fist, wanted to tear the whole room apart. Then, a little later, the energy dissipated into nothingness again, he sank down like a heap of misery and hid his face in his hands.

That was it.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Vermissen/ Missing' by Juju feat. Henning May

Thanks for reading!
Next chapter we're returning to Remus. I'll try to upload it this week, let's see how that will go ;P

See ya!!

Chapter 17: Hardships Of The Best

Chapter Notes

CW: Violence, Injury

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What are you working on?“ Mr. Keuner was asked.

Mr. Keuner replied: "I’m having a hard time, I’m preparing my next mistake.“

The fresh morning air flowed into the bedroom through the open window and felt pleasantly cool on Remus's skin. He lay on his back, the pillow at the nape of his neck, his gaze fixed obliviously on the ceiling. Sirius lay at his side, head resting against his shoulder, gently tracing the scars on his chest with his fingers. They didn't speak, waiting for the heat to leave their bodies again and trying to find the motivation to get up.

Remus wouldn't say he'd grown accustomed to Sirius' overwhelming need for closeness after sex. It still evoked the same aversion, the same need to run away. But over the past few weeks he had definitely learned to deal with it, no longer leaving a trace of it on his face. He now knew how far he could and had to go to get what he wanted. It wasn't always easy, sometimes leaving him feeling a bit on edge and uneasy. On a morning like this, though, it was his way of making sure Sirius would let him go to his mission later.

"So many stories," Sirius murmured at one point into the lazy silence between them, running his hand over the largest and most prominent scar across his chest.

Remus lowered his gaze and followed Sirius' shallow movement, feeling a slight tickle in the places that weren't numb from scarring.

"Actually, always the same one isn't it?"

Sirius shook his head, Remus feeling the movement on his shoulder. "Their age makes them unique. Each one tells of a different moment in

your life."

"Hmm." Remus looked sleepily at the ceiling again, feeling Sirius's fingers travel down along his stomach to just above his hip. Even more gently than before, if at all possible, he traced the outline of his bite there. A sudden feeling of discomfort awoke in Remus and he felt the need to slap Sirius' hand away. But he pulled himself together, slid just a little uneasily to one side and muttered, "We should get up soon."

Sirius, thankfully, let go of his oldest scar and instead placed his hand flat on his chest, his head lifted heavily from his shoulder. He looked dishevelled and his lips, overused by Remus, were slightly swollen.

"It's far too early..." he murmured, stroking his cheek gently, over the tiny resistance of his stubble.

Remus put on an indulgent smile, "Anything before noon is too early for you, isn't it?" He placed his hand on Sirius's. "I still have to pack."

Sirius wasn't impressed. "It can wait." He leaned in and kissed him tenderly.

For a while, Remus allowed Sirius' attempt at distraction, but then he broke away gently but firmly.

"I shouldn't be late," he murmured, stroking Sirius's hair. As he straightened up, he heard Sirius sigh.

"Cruel..." he muttered, but eventually let Remus have his way. He swung his legs out of bed and gathered his clothes, tucked them under his arm and rose. He felt a little uncomfortable, the first signs of the upcoming full moon. The first without Sirius. Remus was curious to see how it would turn out.

He glanced briefly at Sirius, who was lolling on the bed and didn't look like he had any motivation to get up with him.

"I'll call you when breakfast is ready?" offered Remus and Sirius agreed with a shallow nod. Remus had barely closed the window and reached the door into the hallway before Sirius seemed to be slumbering again.

Remus took his time in the bathroom, showering and cleaning himself, meanwhile trying to go through the next steps in his mind so that he wouldn't forget anything. Change of clothes, box, diary, bandages,

painkillers....

Remus put his toothbrush back in the mirrored cabinet above the sink and his eyes fell on Sirius's hairbrush. After an appraising glance towards the door, Remus hurriedly took the brush out of the cupboard and pulled out a few hairs, rolling them up between his fingers and stowing them in his toiletry bag. Inside was a spare toothbrush, razor, wound cream and plaster. It would be enough for a few days.

In his room he got dressed, fished out a few extra clothes and packed them in a small travel bag together with his diary and the box. He felt a bit strange, it was the first time he would leave the flat for several days. And saying that, he didn't even want to imagine what Sirius thought about it.

He took his luggage downstairs and put it in the hall. Then he prepared breakfast - as announced - and afterwards gently woke Sirius, who acted as if he had yelled him out of bed in the middle of the night. His mood improved again, however, when he saw how much effort Remus had put in.

"Wow, Moony, you really mean it today."

Gingerly, Sirius sat down at the dining table and Remus did the same, smiling politely.

"I do have to make sure you eat well, not that you'll fall off your meat while I'm gone."

Sirius didn't smile, but his tone was emphatically chipper. "You're almost acting like I was a hair's breadth away from starvation until you moved in."

"You weren't?"

Sirius raised an eyebrow and gave him a brief resigned look before picking up the cutlery and starting to eat.

Again they lapsed into silence, but it felt different from before in bed. Their parting came closer and it was especially noticeable in Sirius. Remus pretended not to notice and continued to keep a straight face. He wanted to avoid arguing with him about it again, as it would lead nowhere anyway.

After breakfast, during which Sirius seemed to take a lot of time, they cleared the table together and put the kitchen in order. Sirius seemed a bit out of sorts, several times he dropped dishes in the sink and broke a coffee cup. Remus studiously ignored it. It was almost over.

When Remus finally addressed the inevitable some time later and announced his departure, however, Sirius was surprisingly calm. He hugged him fervently, pressed his face into the crook of Remus's shoulder and held him like that for a while. Remus returned the hug with appropriate intensity, waiting patiently for Sirius to release him.

Finally, after an eternity, he lifted his head again, but only enough to look at him sultrily and then kiss him. Remus went along with that too, even gladly, as long as it didn't involve anger or yelling on Sirius's part.

At some point Sirius broke away from him, leaned his forehead against Remus's and placed a hand on the back of his neck.

"I love you." His warm breath brushed Remus's damp lips. "I hope you know that."

Remus smiled and clasped his face with both hands, putting some distance between them. "Of course I know that."

He managed to peel himself out of Sirius' embrace and pick up his things. He was a little surprised himself at how silently Sirius let that happen. Though Remus recognised tears in his eyes, he blinked them away successfully and remained composed, even as Remus stood dressed at the door.

"Try not to die," Sirius whispered, a tortured smile on his face. Remus wondered at the choice of words.

"Always," he smiled anyway and indicated a kissing hand with a quick movement. Sirius blinked hard several times and the smile on his face died a slow, agonising death. Remus sensed he was close to the tipping point. Briskly, therefore, he opened the door, left a quick 'goodbye', and hurried out of the flat.

That had been close.

***

Remus liked 12 Grimmauld Place. Only there were people who knew him as he really was, accepted him exactly like that. It was his first memory, felt almost like home.

"Glad it worked out," Rodolphus Lestrange greeted him at the door and led him to the meeting room. "Got a lot to talk about."

He had already had several brief conversations over the past few weeks, passing on initial information about the Order, but he had never been able to stay long. Dumbledore's order, however, now offered him a whole new freedom. Now he could finally do what he was made for.

In the meeting room, all but Voldemort were gathered who knew of his identity: Bellatrix, Lucius Malfoy and Sirius' annoying brother. Malfoy and Bellatrix greeted him with curt nods and Regulus pretended he wasn't there, as usual. Remus sat down in the seat furthest away from him.

They were silent as one and waited until the door flew open again and Lord Voldemort entered the room with quick, silent steps. They rose hurriedly and bowed their heads respectfully until Voldemort allowed them to sit down again with a careless gesture of his hand. It was always the same procedure.

"My dear friends, good to see you all together," Voldemort greeted them, letting his gaze wander once to everyone at the table. It lingered on Remus.

"Nice to have you back among us too, Remus Lupin."

"The honour is all mine."

"Is it correct, that you will be staying here for the next few days and your services will be at our disposal?"

Remus nodded. "Bellatrix has been kind enough to offer me one of the guest rooms. I am set to return in three days."

"Very good, very good. I already have an assignment in mind for you, but we'll talk about that later. First, I would like to be brought up to date. Rodolphus," he turned to the black-haired man, "how are the preparations for Project Iacuna coming along?"

Rodolphus cleared his throat, "Good. Almost finished. If everything works out the day after tomorrow, we'll have everything we need." He gave Regulus a searching look. "Right?"

Regulus leaned forward in his chair and clasped his hands on the table. "Right. I went over everything again. If I have the Boomslang Skin and the Jobberknoll feathers, I'll be done in two weeks."

"Excellent." Voldemort sounded pleased. "Then let's get started on how to get those ingredients right away."

Lucius took that as his signal. "Yes, my lord. I have identified a suitable target." He waved his wand and an image of a small, nondescript building appeared above the table. Remus couldn't place it, but Bellatrix seemed to. She frowned. "The pharmacy in Diagon Alley? What do we want there? They only have the normal shit. We don't need eel eyes or leeches, Lucius."

Malfoy shook his head emphatically. "I have been told by a credible source that this pharmacy doesn't only sell legal stuff. You just have to ask the right questions."

"And who is this source?" asked Voldemort suspiciously.

"Our newest aspirant," Malfoy admitted, earning questioning looks.

"The boy Avery dragged in last week, Severus Snape."

"I've heard of him," Voldemort said. "Is he skilled in potion making, then?"

Malfoy nodded vehemently. "He is great. Almost as good as our Regulus."

Remus peered at Regulus, who again only had his eyes telling him how much he disliked hearing that.

"And you trust him?"

"I do, he doesn't lie."

"Interesting," Voldemort muttered. "Then... I shall have to take a closer look at this Severus Snape." He seemed lost in thought for a moment, then looked back up at the image of the pharmacy. "Go on, Lucius."

"Of course, My Lord." Malfoy cleared his throat. "Along with Snape, I've figured out how the pharmacy is set up. The easiest way would be

to proceed as follows..."

Even two days later, as Remus lurked in a dark corner of the Diagon Alley in his Death Eater robes, waiting for the signal to attack, Lucius' plan sounded insane. Not because it was particularly complex, for by heaven it wasn't. It was the sheer clumsiness of it. Remus could hardly believe it. His life was a complex, subtle web of lies that he couldn't afford to slack off on for a second. And Lucius Malfoy wanted him to walk into the pharmacy with the other Death Eaters in broad daylight, in the middle of Diagon Alley, and rob it? Insane.

Regulus was fortunately not there, he would have recognised him even with the mask. But there were three others, none of which he could identify. There had been no more than a brief tactical meeting to get to know each other, and that was all that was needed for such a plan. Now Remus just had to trust that the others could be relied upon.

Malfoy stood across the road in the half-shade, unseen by the people who weren't fixing him closely. Remus noticed Malfoy cautiously raise his hand, their signal of connection. Remus and the second Death Eater beside him also raised their hands. Then, when the third Death Eater also seemed to have made visual contact with Malfoy, he showed the number two. Remus understood.

"It's about to start," he murmured to his colleague. He just nodded and moved a little closer. If they were quick, they could be in the pharmacy within seconds. The secured door could be easily removed and no other customer was there. Malfoy would make sure no one disturbed them further.

Remus held his wand in front of him. He could feel excitement inside him.

As Malfoy eventually held up his hand again, Remus and his companion followed. This time Malfoy clenched his hand into a fist and jerked it forward. Their signal to attack.

Remus led the way. He tensed his whole body, detached himself from the wall and stepped out of the shadows. The echo of a pain flitted through his limbs as he ran into the street, reminding him of his recent transformation. But he had to get through that now. This, this was far more significant.

When the first people saw Remus, they froze in their movements, mortal fear freezing their faces. Some screamed, some dropped their purchases and ran for their lives. It felt good. Remus would have liked to bask in the feeling for a while, but he didn't have time. Not that the fools from the Order were going to show up and make his life unnecessarily difficult.

He pointed his wand at the enchanted door of the pharmacy and shouted, "Confringo!" With a huge roar, the door burst into thousands of pieces, leaving a safe passage for Remus and his companion, which they immediately made use of.

As suspected, the small room was deserted except for an inconspicuous woman who had crouched behind the counter to avoid catching any splinters. When she lifted her head again and caught sight of him, she widened her eyes and stood upright again in a flash. All it took was three large steps and Remus was standing directly in front of her, using his full height to look down at her menacingly.

You could see the fear on her face, but she didn't budge.

"What do you want?" Remus noticed her about to pull out her wand and held his up to her face in return.

"I wouldn't do that."

She paused in her movement, her gaze hateful.

Remus pointed to the back room. "We know what you're up to under the table. You will take us to the storeroom now."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"No problem," Remus's companion said, and Remus heard a slight accent come out of his voice. He stepped up beside Remus at the counter and pointed his wand at the woman.

"Obsidio," he whispered. Remus didn't know the spell and watched with interest to see what effect it had. The woman's eyes grew wide, her hands shot to her neck as if someone had just put a rope around it from behind. She was gasping for breath, panting, croaking. There was nothing left of her false pride after only a few seconds.

His companion let the spell fade only slowly, making his point all the more clear. Afterwards, the woman was bent low over the counter, her breathing shallow and desperate, almost hysterical.

"Have you remembered what we're talking about now?" asked Remus calmly.

The woman raised her head and stared at him in rage, her eyes red from the many burst veins. Finally, she pressed her lips together and lowered her head again.

"This way," she breathed, her voice raspy. She turned towards the back room and Remus followed. He watched closely to see if she released the protection spell before she led them through and was surprised to see that she indeed did.

The storeroom was a dark, stuffy place rather reminiscent of Nocturn Alley. Even from a distance Remus recognised some of the ingredients they were looking for standing in open cupboards and on shelves.

"What of it do you want?" she hissed hatefully.

Remus shook his head. "You're going to shut up and let us take care of it now."

Her look was certainly impressive, out of bright red, widened eyes it looked almost daunting. But Remus didn't have time to dwell on it, so he pushed her roughly aside and turned to the other Death Eater.

"Keep an eye on her, I'll do the rest."

The Death Eater nodded and pointed his wand at her. It was effective, the woman was so intimidated by him that she kept her distance of her own accord. Remus noticed on the sidelines how he took the woman's wand from her, while he himself grabbed a small box from the depths of his cloak and began hastily clearing the shelves. Most of the ingredients he had in mind, ginger root, scarlet quills, flux weed... for the rest he kept peering at the small list taped to the side of the box. He worked quickly and the seemingly endless space in the box filled more and more.

Just before he finished, a loud explosion was suddenly heard from the street. For a splitsecond Remus looked in the direction of the noise, as did his companion. A mistake. The next moment Remus heard a pained scream and saw his companion go down. Remus dropped the box and drew his wand, quick as a flash. The woman was holding a small vial of some dark liquid, wherever she had gotten it from. From the way his companion was writhing on the ground, he deduced what must have happened. He huffed.

"Crucio," he whispered and the woman immediately collapsed. The vial flew out of her hand and shattered against the wall, where the thick dark red liquid instantly began to eat a hole in the wallpaper.

Remus let the woman fidget a little, made sure his companion was not critically injured and tried to pick up something of the tumult that had broken out in the street. But the woman's annoying screeching made it almost impossible.

"Shut your mouth!" he shouted, kicking her in the side with all his might. Malfoy's words echoed in his ears: *'Try not to kill her, we'll get all the ingredients we need through her in the future.'*

Oh, he didn't give a shit. He finished the curse and looked down at the woman squirming like a fish out of water. She had dared to attack him and his companion. Such a thing was punishable by death.

He raised his wand, slowly, finally.

"I tried, I really did," he sighed. "But you want to die so badly."

And then he did it. It was easy, far too easy. The "Avada Kedavra" came from his lips as if it were nothing. A half flick of the wrist and the woman was dead. It triggered nothing in him. As if he had swatted a fly, it felt just as irrelevant. Why hadn't he done this before? Why had they bothered with her? Replacements would be found. Everyone was replaceable.

He didn't waste another glance on the woman and instead picked up the box from the floor, which fortunately hadn't broken. Hastily, he slipped it back into the cloak and knelt beside his companion, who seemed slow to calm down. Remus noticed that he was holding his arm, his cloak burnt through at the spot from the dark liquid. He didn't even need to see the wound to know it was serious.

"We should get you to Regulus as soon as possible. I'm sure he'll be able to help you." He straightened the injured man and put his healthy arm over his shoulder. He was heavy, but Remus managed to sit up and stagger with him out of the back room towards the entrance. He just had to let Malfoy know they were done, then they could all disappear. But he already suspected who might be waiting outside.

He stepped through the ruined entrance and found himself in the middle of a battle. Malfoy and the other Death Eater were fighting two Order members and an Auror. One of them was Mary, who had her face twisted in hatred and was skillfully firing curse after curse at

them.

"At last!" exclaimed Malfoy strained. "Thought you'd never come back!" He fended off a shock spell from the Auror and glanced at his companion. "Life threatening?"

"No," Remus asserted, even if he didn't really know it. "Let's go."

Lucius nodded and a moment later they were out of Diagon Alley.

***

"Phew," Regulus said as he rolled up the injured man's charred sleeve. He was lying on an old couch, unconscious and his arm must look so bad that even Regulus frowned. Remus knew his name by now, Malfoy had said it when he had been feverishly talking to Rodolphus in the corridor: Antonin Dolohov.

"Do you know what she had in that vial?" asked Regulus, looking closely at the wound. Remus was not standing very close, but even he could see the dark purple edges of the wound and hear the soft hiss of smouldering flesh. It was unpleasant.

"I don't know, it looked very thick, had this really dark red colour to it."

"Hmm," Regulus made, seeming lost in thought. Then he put his arm back and rose. "Keep an eye on him, I'll get something."

Remus nodded and sat down on the vacant armchair next to the couch, continuing to avert his gaze from the wound. They should have just killed the woman the moment she had released the protection spell. Such a mistake would not happen to him again.

Regulus returned quickly, several vials and ointments on his arm.

"I don't know exactly what it is yet, but this should still help prevent further spread," he muttered half to himself as he settled down beside the couch. Remus watched him silently as he carefully poured Dolohov a potion and then ran his wand over the wound while silently muttering something under his breath. After two more of the

ointments had been used, there was a rapid improvement. The wound did not shrink, but it seemed to stop growing. The smouldering stopped and the edges of the wound lost its aggressive colour.

Relieved, Regulus leaned back. "Thank God," he whispered. "I thought he was going to lose his arm."

Remus regarded Regulus from the side. "You're really good at all this shit," he admitted, albeit reluctantly.

Regulus looked at him dismissively. "Save your compliments, Lupin. They always sound like an insult coming from you anyway."

Remus had a retort on the tip of his tongue, but he stifled it. He couldn't be too rude with him now that he was dependent on him and knew what a central role he held within the Death Eaters. But the way Regulus regarded him disparagingly made it immensely difficult.

"Were you at least successful with the ingredients?" Regulus asked him before anything could cross Remus's lips. He fished in his cloak for the box and handed it to Regulus. "Yes, at least that worked."

Regulus opened the box and took a small peek inside. Lost in thought, he nodded. "This will help me a lot. My supplies have really been a joke lately."

"Are you going to be there? In two weeks I mean?"

Regulus shook his head, his gaze fixed on the box. "I'm just helping with the preparation. Others have been chosen."

Remus couldn't tell if Regulus was disappointed or relieved at that. Before he could inquire further, Regulus spoke up again, almost hectically.

"By the way, I..." Only now did he seem to think about how he wanted to continue the sentence. "I may have an idea how to improve the taste of your potion..."

Remus frowned. "Wow, what is this all of a sudden? You want to do me a favour?" He could hardly believe it.

Regulus looked at him hatefully. "Keep your head down or I'll change my mind."

Remus raised his hands defensively. "It's all right. I'm happy about it. I

get the urge to vomit every time I drink it, there's no way I'm complaining." He lowered his hands again and glanced at his left forearm where the dark mark wafted, visible for the first time since the ceremony. Probably what he enjoyed most about the days at Grimmauld Place was that he could reveal it and be spared the taste of rancid milk.

"Yeah, I think I can play around with it a bit," Regulus continued, his gaze staring off into space. "Got it well thought out."

"Very nice. From the next batch then?"

Regulus rocked his hand back and forth, looking unconvinced. "Preparations for Iacuna are setting me back a bit, so probably not. But I think when you're back from the mission, new version of potion should be ready."

"Can't wait."

Regulus looked at him silently and Remus couldn't interpret his look, for a change.

***

29th April 1973

Today I did something I'm not proud of. In the days before the full moon I'm always a bit... unstable, I've known that for a long time. But today was really bad. Fucking Snape was driving me up the wall and he just wouldn't stop. Laughed at my new scar on my face and made a big joke of it with his stupid friends. James tried to stop me and suggested we just get back at him with another prank, but I didn't care. I saw red. Punched Snape, right in the face. His nose was bleeding badly, he was a mess. McGonagall gave me two weeks detention. Sirius thinks he deserved it and that I shouldn't blame myself. But I still feel bad. I don't want to give in to the monster inside me, that's not me.

Why is it so hard for me to control myself sometimes?

***

Sirius wasn't home when Remus returned. That wasn't surprising, he was half a day early and Sirius was surely tied up somewhere with the Order. He took advantage of the quiet, tucked everything away, covered his tracks. He threw his laundry into the washing machine and went for a long shower, so that Sirius wouldn't recognise any vague smell from his old home. Afterwards he hid his freshly filled box and his diary and had a smoke. He had hardly had a chance to do so for quite some time.

It had been an exciting few days, his first assignment in Diagon Alley had only been the crowning glory. He had been involved in hours of debates, fully participating in something for the first time. And now their first plan was in place, their first real plan. And Remus would play the lead role in it. He could barely wait.

When Sirius came home a few hours later, Remus greeted him casually from the kitchen as if he had never been away. He had exactly two seconds to catch his breath before Sirius nearly swept him off his feet and pulled him into a tumultuous hug.

"Oh wow, where did you get that strength?" gasped Remus chokingly and returned the gesture, pressing his cheek against Sirius' and feeling his warmth. The smell of Sirius' shampoo rose to his nose, it smelled familiar.

Sirius hastily released the hug and took his face in his hands, littering it with kisses. He didn't want to stop at all, which finally made Remus laugh. "You almost act like I've been away for a year!"

Sirius sighed theatrically, but there was unmistakable joy in his eyes. "Well, that's how it felt. The hardest three days of my life."

"Isn't that a bit of an exaggeration?"

"I never exaggerate!" retorted Sirius, brushing Remus's hair out of his forehead. It was a small, loving gesture and Remus mirrored it, wrapping his arms around Sirius's waist and hugging him gently. Their faces were close and Sirius, still dealing with his stubborn lock of hair, looked more at peace than he had in a long time.

"How was it?" he finally asked him softly when he was satisfied and all his attention was back on Remus. Remus held his gaze, not letting

it go. One hand wandered to Sirius's face, gently cupping it, stroking it with his thumb.

Oh, the usual. I just killed someone. And I didn't even mind, in fact it was a relief. Some people just don't deserve to live. Do you agree with me there, Sirius?

"Wasn't so bad," he said as their faces grew closer. "I found the pack quickly. They were very gullible, I think they trust me already."

Sirius' gaze kept darting to his lips. "That sounds good," he whispered. That was exactly what he wanted to hear. No questions, no doubts. For a while longer he let Sirius fidget, keeping their lips inches away, watching him as desire clouded his mind more and more. Then, at the right moment, he finally gave in and bridged the distance. Sirius sighed into the kiss, surrendering to it completely.

That was how Remus liked it best. This was how he was in control.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Stories of Mr. Keuner/Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner' by Bertolt Brecht

The next chapter will mark the end of Act 1, that means it will have some significance plotwise.

Writing goes along great btw! Currently working on chapter 59. I'm really focused on finishing it rn, once that's happened, the uploads will be more frequent! :)

Hope you liked the chapter.

See ya! :*

Chapter 18: The Hand That Feeds

Chapter Notes

CW: Minor Character Death, Graphic Depictions of Violence, Injuries, Blood, Mental Distress, Trauma

This chapter again turns very dark in the end. I'm sorry.
If you're not in a good headspace rn and don't want to read something with these CWs, you can read up to the phrase 'Remus already forgotten', which is underlined, and then skip to the end notes, where I give a summary of what's happening after that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What if this whole crusade's a charade

And behind it all there's a price to be paid

For the blood on which we dine

Justified in the name of the holy and the divine

Marlene McKinnon never found it easy to love. It didn't come to her the way it did to other people, like Sirius or her brother, for whom loving was as easy as breathing. She just wasn't like that. Long enough she had wondered if there was something wrong with her. Whether she was too cold for that, had a heart of stone and therefore none of her parents' love had taken root in her.

As a child she had been a lot on her own, a born loner. But when she was twelve, that changed abruptly. Mary Macdonald came into her life, self-confident in her Quidditch uniform, loving, incomparable. She showed her that she was capable of having friends after all, that her heart might not even be made of stone. Mary and her friends, who soon became Marlene's too, made her life worth living.

But it was Dorcas who made it complete. Dorcas Meadowes, a girl as radiant as the sun. As bright as a shooting star, flying on and on, far above Marlene, making everything a little lighter, more colourful.

Loving her was the easiest thing in the world.

***

"Marleeene," Dorcas said, half laughing, half resigned, as she was prevented from getting up from the bed for the third time by Marlene. "I have to go, you know that!"

"I don't care," Marlene replied impassively, also for the third time in a row. She brought Dorcas back into her arms where she belonged and kissed her as she wanted to do every second of the day.

Dorcas faltered as usual and let her have it, leaning into the kiss, holding on to Marlene. It was the best feeling in the world.

"Marls, I'm only out for a few hours," she breathed, between kisses. "Tonight we can continue this."

"Hmm." Marlene was not thrilled by this.

"You know I'll get in trouble with these old Auror douches if I'm late for my lessons again. I don't want them to think I'm not taking the training seriously."

Marlene knew she was very serious about this. One of her many virtues.

"Fiiine," she reluctantly agreed and finally let Dorcas up, but not without kissing her properly first.

Hastily Dorcas slipped into her clothes afterwards and looked at herself in the large standing mirror.

"Oh God, what happened to my hair?" she said in shock.

Marlene laughed. "Sorry!"

"You're not," Dorcas grinned back and hurried into the bathroom to do damage control. Meanwhile, Marlene was also trying to motivate herself to get up and make herself presentable. Dorcas, as usual, had all the energy she lacked.

Five minutes later Dorcas reappeared at her bedroom door, looking noticeably fresher and less dishevelled and was half on her way out.

"I'm off, Marls. I'll see you tonight?"

Marlene, who was half hanging in her wardrobe looking for a shirt that wasn't wrinkled, smiled fondly in her direction. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Me too." One last look of promise, then she was gone and Marlene heard only her muffled footsteps hurrying down the stairs. It would be long hours again until her return.

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When the doorbell rang in the early afternoon, Marlene had her hands full of yeast dough.

"Of course," she groaned, annoyed.

Looking for help, she looked at her brother, who was lying lazily on the couch, reading one of his Quidditch magazines and making no move to answer the door.

"Danny, do you want to maybe get your arse to the door?"

"Can't," Danny replied, unmoved by her tone. "Busy."

"Lazy bastard." Exasperated, she let go of her bread dough and wiped her hands clean on the tea towel. Inwardly she hurled more insults at her brother, but outwardly she controlled herself. Her mother hated it when they argued.

She hurried to the door and opened it briskly. When she saw who was grinning at her, her mood lifted abruptly.

"Oh hi! What brings you here?" she asked, looking into the grinning faces of Remus and Sirius.

Remus looked at her apologetically. "We were out and about and thought we'd stop by. It's back to the mission tomorrow and otherwise we won't see each other again for far too long." He exchanged a quick glance with Sirius. "Is now a good time for you?"

Marlene hadn't kept track of what day of the week it was. "Oh, that's right. Sure, you're always welcome!" Grinning, she held the door open and let the two lovebirds in. "You've been wanting to come over for

ages anyway, it's about time."

"I agree," Remus said, looking around the entrance area. It was a bit messy, but that was normal state at their place. Too much order killed creativity.

"Gotta say, that's exactly how I pictured your place," Sirius said as he placed his shoes neatly off to the side.

"Wait till you see the rest," Marlene grinned, thinking of all the colourful canvases her father had scattered around the house in the most impossible places. That was always her favourite part of the house tour.

"If you can spare a little time, you can join us for dinner later. I'm in the middle of baking bread for it."

"That sounds great!" grinned Sirius, sounding a little hoarse. "Well, if it's not too much trouble for you."

"Oh nonsense. When my mum cooks, there's always enough for at least ten people."

"Sounds good." Remus peered into the kitchen. "Is your mother home then?"

"Yeah, she and Dad are in the garden. Digging around something, I don't know what. But I don't think it'll be too much longer."

Remus nodded absently. "Your mum must be really busy right now."

"You mean at work?" Marlene nodded expansively. "Really bad. She's hardly ever home anymore. Hope that gets better soon."

"I'm sure it will," Sirius smiled encouragingly and Marlene returned it.

As soon as Remus had taken off his jacket, she cleared her throat solemnly with her hand held out. "Are you ready for the ultimate tour of the McKinnon family's venerable house museum?"

Remus nodded in awe. "Can't wait."

***

After her extremely impressive house tour, she hauled Remus and Sirius over to her brother on the couch and finished kneading the already half-risen dough. Docilely, the two sat there for a while, hands folded in their laps and at a proper distance from each other, as if they were, at most, good acquaintances. It was sweet.

Then, when Sirius disappeared into the bathroom after a short while, Remus tried in vain to make small talk with Danny, whose whole attention, however, remained on the Chudley Cannons. Finally, he casually saved himself in Marlene's direction. She shrugged helplessly.

"Sorry! Once my brother sinks into his unhealthy obsession, he becomes a zombie."

"I can hear you, Marls," Danny grumbled.

"Good!" she retorted, giving Remus a meaningful look. Then she gestured towards the hallway with her thumb and lowered her voice. "How are things with your lover boy?"

He rolled his eyes. "He's not my lover boy."

"Oh yes he is, honey." She eyed him closely and had to grin. "So it's going well?"

Remus, the little prude, just shrugged. "Would be good if you didn't bring it up in front of him. He... still needs time."

"Never thought our little Casanova Sirius would be so reticent about anything."

Remus looked searchingly at the door. "After all, this is a completely new situation for him. You of all people should understand that."

Marlene followed his gaze and nodded, thoughtful. "I do. But ironically, it's always been Sirius I've thought of when I've been afraid to do something. 'Be like Sirius, he's never cared what anyone else thought.' It's helped me a lot."

"There are few people who care more about what others think than him."

"He really is a lot more complex than you might think at first glance."

Remus looked at her seriously. "That's true."

As if on cue, Sirius returned from the bathroom and came towards

them smiling broadly. "What's with the serious faces?"

Marlene put the dough in a floured bowl and set it aside. "We just missed you painfully."

"Understandable."

Remus had lowered his eyes, seemed lost in his thoughts. Marlene would like to know which ones. Sometimes he seemed inscrutable.

Marlene grabbed some onions and carrots from the kitchen counter and began hastily chopping them.

"Really glad you came by again. Missed you at the last Order meetings, Remus."

Remus rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. "Yeah, I'm really sorry about that. I'll try to come back sometime soon. It's just, this thing with Dumbledore..."

Marlene nodded in understanding. "It's exhausting enough, I get it. You do more for the Order than anyone else as it is."

Remus shrugged. "Still, I should show up more often. Not that Moody forgets me."

Marlene smiled thinly. "He never forgets anything, believe me."

Just then Marlene heard the patio door open and her mother's loud voice sounded through the living area.

"...et know, he always has an idea about things like that."

When she rounded the corner and saw Remus and Sirius standing by the kitchen, she stopped in surprise. She was wearing loose clothes smeared with dirt and wiping her hands on an old rag. Her otherwise tall, impressive figure looked only half as intimidating this way. But she was also more familiar to Marlene this way.

"Oh, Marlene, you didn't say you were expecting someone else." She didn't sound unfriendly, on the contrary.

"Yes, those two just dropped by spontaneously. Can they stay for dinner later?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Sure." Her eyes fell on the vegetables Marlene had cut up. "Make yourselves comfortable, I'll get right on

with it here."

Marlene grinned gratefully. " Thanks," and pulled her friends along with her. "Let's go outside for a bit, the weather is great."

They followed her willingly. But Remus in particular seemed barely able to take his eyes off her mother.

Outside, the summer sun was beating down on them. It was the most beautiful part of summer. The heat was not so heavy yet. The leaves of the trees still young and bright green. Everything was alive. Marlene was glad they didn't live in the city.

Her father was still outside, just putting the garden tools back into the big shed. He was the complete opposite of her mother, small, roundish, gentle. He smiled and indulged a lot. He was the one who had taught Marlene to search for beauty in little things.

"Ah, Sirius and Remus, right? Nice to meet you!" he called out, waving at them after noticing them. Marlene was proud of him for remembering them. As a Muggle, the whole magical world could be a bit overwhelming at times. But when Marlene had told him about her friends, he had always listened very carefully.

"Our pleasure, Mr McKinnon," Remus replied politely and Sirius nodded affirmatively.

"Brace yourselves," Marlene whispered semi-seriously in their direction. "He's so going to grill you at dinner at the latest. He loves to meet wizards. Especially when they're friends of mine."

"Oh, that's not a problem at all," Sirius smiled. "We can handle that."

They sat down in the freshly mown grass and enjoyed the sun. In the background, their father was still moving a few things back and forth before he finally approached them and asked a little shyly, "Could one of you give me a hand? I need to bring some pictures from the shed into the house, otherwise Judith will probably kill me. There have been a lot..."

"Happy to help," Sirius called out eagerly, even before their father had finished speaking. Dad nodded gratefully and led him into the shed that had become more and more his studio over the past few weeks. He kept finding other places where he could paint best, his muse sometimes as elusive as a snitch chased by two seekers.

They emerged from the shed again shortly afterwards and Marlene watched Sirius climb over two fallen rakes and stumble out of the exit, three large paintings in his hands.

"Do you need help?" asked Marlene, but Sirius shook his head vehemently. "It's all right, there aren't that many of them."

Remus looked at Marlene and shrugged. "Don't even try to help him. It's wasted effort."

Marlene laughed and let Sirius and her father stagger into the house. Meanwhile, a blackbird scolded from the apple tree a few steps beside them.

"Phew," Marlene made at some point and stretched extensively. "Crazy, isn't it? Sitting here like this, you wouldn't think there was a war going on."

There was no reply from Remus, so she gave him a quick glance out of the corner of her eye. He was sitting upright in the grass, propped up on his arms. He looked tense.

"Are you okay?" she asked him cautiously.

Remus took a second, then his head snapped towards her and he smiled broadly. "Oh no, just thinking about what you said. You're right. It's a different world here."

Marlene eyed him thoughtfully and he quickly averted his eyes. Then, as if remembering something, he rummaged in his trouser pocket and pulled out a Muggle wallet.

"I wanted to show you something else." He pulled something out of the compartment for the notes, as it turned out, two photographs. The first one he took away and placed face down on the grass, the second one he handed to her. It was a picture of the two of them on the couch in the Gryffindor common room, they had their arms over each other' shoulders and their heads resting against each other. Marlene felt a pleasant warmth in her chest as she remembered the situation. It had been in the weeks leading up to graduation, a time when all the stress surrounding the NEWTs threatened to go over Marlene's head. Remus had always managed to calm her down, there was something about him, such a confidence, an inner calm. Marlene had never told him, but she had always admired him for it.

Sirius had taken the picture. She was glad it didn't show her dark

circles and stress pimples too much. She just looked happy, as did Remus, whose scars also seemed to be miraculously fading. It was a muggle image, without any movement. But somehow that just made it all the more special.

"Where did you get that from?" asked Marlene, not wanting to stop looking at it. "It would have fit nicely in your album."

"Thought so too." Remus didn't smile. "That was still on the old film from my camera. There were only a few pictures on it though, I had it developed the other day."

"I'm really glad now, in retrospect, that you were always bugging us with that stupid camera. You were ahead of your time."

Remus shrugged.

"Do you think you could make me a copy of it? I'm not sure if it can still be done through the photographer, otherwise I'll see if I can find a spell for it!"

"I'll see what I can do."

Marlene smiled. "Great, thank you."

Remus put the picture back in the wallet and picked up the other one as well. This time, however, Marlene could see who was in it. She gave Remus a meaningful look.

"Cute picture," was all she commented and Remus paused for a second.

"Oh, this?" he casually turned the picture so Marlene could look at it closely. It was a picture of Sirius. It must have been taken in the same time period as the other one, because Sirius' hair was almost as long as it was now. His upper body was slightly turned away, seemingly hunched over a table, but his face was turned towards the camera. He was grinning, up to both ears, in all his radiance. His eyes looked amused, as if he were about to make a mischievous comment. Marlene had never seen a picture that had captured Sirius so perfectly.

Hastily, Remus folded it again and tucked it into the wallet with the other picture. "Yeah, I meant to give that to Sirius. Forgot I had that too."

Marlene shook her head indulgently and pinched his side

affectionately. "You're so sweet sometimes, it's almost unbearable."

Remus looked at her in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

She smiled to herself. "Nothing at all. Quite a great idea of yours. I'm sure you'll do that, too, and not keep it to yourself to secretly pine over him."

Remus didn't roll his eyes as Marlene had expected, he didn't react at all, just looked at her. She felt the warmth in her chest slowly ebb away. Somehow ...

Something was strange.

Something was strange about Remus, he....

A scream rang out from the house. It was her mother. Marlene wheeled around, stared into the house, through the open patio door. Nothing could be seen.

"Mum?" shouted Marlene breathlessly, jumping up and hurrying back into the house, **Remus already forgotten.**

She saw no one in the living area, Danny's Quidditch magazine had been carelessly thrown on the floor and further back in the kitchen, a pot stood unattended on the cooker, simmering away.

"Mum, Danny?" she called again, her voice shrill. After terrible, silent seconds, she heard her brother from upstairs. "Marls! Come quick!"

She sprinted to the hallway, up the stairs and heard voices getting louder. At the top of the corridor, she was met with chaos. Her mother -unhurt, thank goodness- was kneeling, completely distraught, beside her.... beside her....

"Dad?" Marlene rushed to her father, who was lying on the floor, right next to the ladder to the attic. His eyes were closed, he wasn't moving. His right leg was twisted unnaturally, a rapidly growing pool of blood formed around his head.

"What happened?" gasped Marlene, unable to form even a clear thought. She watched her mother draw the wand, trying to stop his bleeding as tears streamed down her face.

"He...he fell down the ladder," Sirius finally answered, stuttering, and

Marlene only now realised that he was there too, huddled next to her deathly pale brother. "I don't know how it happened, we were just moving the ... the pictures into the attic and then..."

"He needs to go to hospital!" intervened Danny, tears in his eyes too. Marlene's mother sobbed quietly, continuing to try desperately to keep the blood in Dads body.

"We can carry him out together! Then we'll apparate to the hospital!" suggested Marlene, thinking of the best place to tackle her father.

"No, we can't," another voice sounded behind them, Marlene turned and recognised Remus at the bottom of the stairs, his face stony. "He must have serious injuries to his back. He should not be moved unnecessarily under any circumstances."

"But we can't move him from here... he'll be..." Marlene's voice broke. What was happening right now? Five minutes ago everything had been fine, hadn't it? Five minutes ago she had seen her father....

"You must get him away from here immediately," Remus repeated aloud. His voice sounded razor sharp. "He may only have a few minutes left."

"Mum!" exclaimed Danny, who must have been at least as devastated by Remus' words as Marlene was.

Rushed, her mother looked up from her futile efforts, her hands shaking so violently that she almost dropped her wand. All eyes were on her.

"What am I supposed to do?" she cried helplessly. Marlene had never seen her like this before. Her mother, who always knew the answer to everything, never lost her nerve.

"You have to make sure you can disapparate from here. Loosen the spell on the house, just a few seconds." Remus presented the solution precisely, tantalisingly, almost too easily. Something deep inside Marlene sounded an alarm, something yelled out, wanted to tell her something. But the fear, the tears, the time pressure made it go unheard.

"Mum, you've got to do it! You're in control of it. Just a few seconds until Danny and I disapparated!"

Her mother clutched her head, fingers bloody, breath rattling. A

million thoughts seemed to race through her head at once.

"Hurry Mum!" shouted Danny, his voice cracking. "Please!"

Abruptly, as if following a sudden impulse, her mother raised her hands and waved her wand. Marlene felt a slight buzz run through her body. The protection spell had been released.

"Quick n-," her mother shouted, but she couldn't even finish those two words. A huge bang was heard and then many things happened at once.

Someone shouted 'Stupefy' and a red flash hit her mother across the chest, making her collapse unconscious on the spot. There was a loud crack, several times, and suddenly half a dozen Death Eaters were standing around her, tall, in black cloaks and silver masks. Marlene had no time to understand what was happening, no time to catch her breath. Her brother next to her cried out and not a second later Marlene felt herself being grabbed roughly and her head being slammed hard onto the floor. Everything blurred before her eyes, everything became a vague, unreal nightmare. As if through a deep valley, she heard the echo of a maniacal laugh. It sounded like Sirius, but at the same time terrifyingly alien.

"You're a genius, Lupin!" he exclaimed. Marlene tried to make sense of those words, but everything was spinning. She heard her brother yell out in pain, but she couldn't see him, couldn't see what they were doing to him.

"You almost blew it, you asshole!" she heard Remus reply, his voice sounding tinny, icy cold. Everything in Marlene froze, a dark foreboding boring into her guts. The alarm bells, so far fading into nothingness, now rang over loud in her ears. This couldn't be, this wasn't possible....

"What am I supposed to have screwed up? I've been here getting my fingers dirty while you've been relaxing in the garden."

"Just shut the fuck up," Remus rumbled, his voice now close, right next to Marlene.

"Re...mus," she gasped, at least the part of her that still couldn't believe what was happening.

"Shut up or I'll kill you," he said sharply.

This wasn't Remus. Marlene was convinced. This was the work of Polyjuice Potion or the Imperius Curse. Any of it. There was no other possibility. Slowly her vision cleared and although she was not able to stand up and the world was tilted 90 degrees, she quickly realised what she was looking at. Her father, motionless, his face turned towards her, only a few inches away. The pool of blood around his head was so large that it almost reached Marlene. He was so pale.

"What are you waiting for? Surely the fucking Order will realise something's going on here in a minute." The voice sounded familiar to Marlene, but she couldn't quite place it.

"You're right," Remus said, stepping into Marlene's field of vision. Marlene turned her head, looked up, into his face. It was familiar and eerily alien at the same moment. Nothing was left of the gentle, loving bookworm, of her best friend. And what she didn't see either were traces of the Imperius curse. No glazed eyes, no mindless movements. This man knew exactly what he was doing. And he'd also spent well over an hour with her without taking a drink or leaving, unlike....

"Can I do the father? He was so incredibly annoying. He wouldn't stop talking about those fucking pictures, would have loved to slit his throat right then and there." Marlene turned her head as far as she could in the other direction, towards the source of the voice. What she beheld was a disgusting mutation, a cross between Sirius's black silky hair and greasy blonde strands, between his graceful features and pockmarked, misshapen skin. It was grotesque.

"Do what you want," Remus said annoyedly.

Marlene's head shot back to her father, she tried to reach her hands out to him, to do anything, anything. But she was grabbed and her arms yanked back so roughly that they nearly dislocated her shoulders. Ignoring the pain, she continued to reach forward, stretching her face towards her father's.

"Dad," she gasped, "Dad, wake up..." *Get up, please please please....*

"Avada Kedavra," the ugly Death Eater whispered as the last traces of Sirius disappeared from his face. A flash of green, hair's breadth past Marlene. Her father's chest, previously steadily rising and falling, came to a halt. Marlene thought she was losing her mind.

"Disgusting muggle scum. A disgrace."

Danny didn't respond audibly, Marlene didn't know if he was even

conscious anymore or like her unable to even begin to comprehend what they had just witnessed.

"Wonderful, now who wants to take credit with the Dark Lord and murder Judith McKinnon?"

The words were too much for Marlene, choking up she cried out and in return she received a violent kick in the back that made her whole body shriek in pain.

"Mum!" she continued nonetheless. "Mum, Mum!"

"I said shut the fuck up!" snarled Remus, giving her the next kick. Remus Lupin kicked her while the Death Eaters he had brought into her house were killing her parents. This wasn't real.

She continued to fight the iron grip on her arms and the pain in her body. She couldn't let this happen, she couldn't....

The next kick, Marlene blacked out for a moment. "Last warning, bitch."

"Why are we even bothering with them? Whose idea was it to let these worthless Half-Bloods live in the first place? Even if we obliviate them, they will only cause us trouble in the future," the ugly Death Eater said.

"We follow the plan," Remus replied matter-of-factly.

"We never follow the plan," he hissed. "And the brats are getting on my nerves."

Marlene took advantage of the brief discussion to continue resisting his grip. She couldn't see her mother; she was behind her father's body. But she was alive. If only she woke up, then she could fight off the Death Eaters. She could do that, she was the best witch in all of ...

"So you're allowed to just murder the stupid bitch in the pharmacy because she gets on your nerves, but if I do it, it's wrong? Who do you think you are, you arrogant fucking mutant!"

Marlene only caught the argument peripherally, completely in the tunnel. She imagined that the grip on her arms was slowly loosening, a little more, a little more....

"Back off, Crabbe," Remus rumbled with completely unfamiliar

authority.

"You don't tell me what to do!" he screeched, completely beside himself. Suddenly several voices rose, air was drawn in sharply and Marlene paused. What...?

"No, stop!" shouted Remus, but he was interrupted by a much louder, vicious "AVADA KEDAVRA!" that once again bathed the room in green.

A beautiful colour, actually. Reminded Marlene once again of the leaves at the beginning of summer. Young, lively, full of energy. They still had so much to do, so much to see.

Marlene too. She had already played it out with Dorcas, so many times. After the war, when it was all over, they would travel. Around the world, without a fixed home, without a destination. Just the two of them. Who knows, maybe the leaves on the trees on the other side of the world were just as green.

Maybe it was her version of a life passing by. After all, she hadn't experienced anything yet, everything still ahead of her. She was only at the beginning of her journey.

It was only a millisecond, all the thoughts, all the desires firing through Marlene as if they knew what was coming. And then, suddenly, there was silence.

Then there was blackness.

Then there was

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'The Hand That Feeds' by Nine Inch Nails

[Summary: Marlene returns inside, where she finds her father, apparently fallen down the stairs. He is critically injured and needs to go to hospital immediately. In desperation, Marlene's mother releases the protective spell over the house so that they can disapparate, but they never get around to it. As it turns out, this was an elaborate plan by the Death Eaters, who take advantage of the lack of protection and knock Marlene's mother out and restrain Marlene and her brother. It turns out that Sirius is not really Sirius, but a Death Eater called Crabbe who has been drinking Polyjuice Potion. Marlene can't believe that Remus

would do something like that, firmly believing in Imperius or something similar. On a whim, Crabbe kills her father in front of her. Then a fight breaks out between Crabbe and Remus because Crabbe also wants to kill Marlene and Danny, but Remus refuses. The argument escalates, Crabbe snaps, yells the death curse and it hits Marlene.]

The point of no return.

See ya

Chapter 19: You

Chapter Notes

CW Grief, Emotional Manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If you must die, sweetheart

Die knowing your life was my life's best part

Remus had three days to plan his reaction. Three days of arguing, finger-pointing and headlines in the Daily Prophet.

McKinnon family wiped out by you-know-who - here's all the information:

High-ranking ministry official Judith McKinnon killed by Death Eaters - did she know too much?

McKinnon tragedy: could their death have been prevented?

It was a disaster. They had planned their mission so meticulously, with the aim of killing both parents at most, and then this. Because fucking Crabbe had had a childish tantrum. He'd already done such a bad job as Sirius that Remus had wanted to wring his neck. He would personally ask Voldemort to never be sent on a mission with him again.

But it had happened nevertheless. And he was in for a difficult few weeks back in the rat's nest. Sirius had coped quite well with the death of James's parents, probably also to be strong for James. But even that had been annoying. And now Marlene's death ... that was a different story.

Above all, he would have to play convincingly. He knew that Marlene

had been one of his closest friends. He would have to draw on his entire repertoire to be convincing in front of Sirius. Exhausting.

After Remus had packed his things in the guest room of Grimmauld Place, he paid Regulus another visit as arranged. He found him in his stuffy potions room, where he was bent over the cauldron like an old man, tipping a grey powder into it.

"Can I interrupt?"

Regulus gave him the briefest of glances.

"No," he snorted, but straightened anyway and stepped away from the cauldron to the worktop. Remus followed him cautiously.

"Did you manage to adjust the potion?"

Regulus nodded curtly and extended his hand to Remus promptly. Remus handed him the box.

"Should taste a little better now. Still not like lemonade, admittedly, but, you know." Regulus began to pack the vials, his hand movements quick and precise.

"Anything is better than the way it tastes now."

When Regulus was finished, he closed the box again and handed it back to Remus. "I've given you enough for two weeks now. When are you coming back?"

"Dumbledore wants me to spend every full moon with the pack for the next few months. That means then I'll be here for several days at a time. For my next batch of the potion, I'll sneak away in two weeks."

"Well then," Regulus, all charm, gestured towards the door, "have a safe journey back to the land of lies."

Remus once again stifled a comment. He would probably never warm to this boy.

Back in his room, he opened the box and took out the first vial. He released the small cork, put it to his lips and emptied it in one go. The consistency had not changed, still unpleasantly thick. But the taste of mould was gone, instead it tasted slightly metallic, almost like blood, with a hint of liquorice. It still wasn't good, but at least it was

bearable. He watched with slight regret as the dark mark slowly disappeared.

He packed the rest deep down in his bag and zipped it up. Then, before he set off, he got himself into the right mindset. Good humour at first, reunion joy. Then wonder, worry, disbelief, sadness. He could do this. He had been doing it for months.

***

July 12, 1973

Mom died.

Cancer. Keeled over two days after I got home. A few days later her organs failed. I don't know what else to write. I wish I had told her I loved her more often. I hate myself for not doing so. Why do people have to die? I can't take it.

***

There was silence in the flat as Remus stepped through the front door. He was sure Sirius was there, probably had been waiting for him to return for hours, frantically thinking of how to break the news to him. Remus hoped he didn't press the issue for so long.

Sirius sat at the dining table with his back to him. Hanging in his chair, more like, on closer inspection. Slumped low, hands pressed on the arms of the chair, eyes fixed on the white wall. He'd certainly heard him by now, Remus hadn't bothered to be quiet. But he did not turn around. Would the old Remus already notice that something was wrong?

He decided against it. "Sirius!" he called joyfully, setting down his travel bag. "I'm back!"

Sirius winced as if he'd been slapped in the face. Slowly, gingerly, he straightened in his chair and turned his upper body to face Remus. The sight made him pause, and it wasn't even an act. He looked terrible. His face was sunken, grey, blank. His hair unkempt and dull,

his shoulders pulled forward. Remus was sure he hadn't eaten or really slept in the past three days.

"What's wrong?" he asked seriously, at this point he could no longer play the clueless friend.

Sirius tried to smile, but it only looked like a grimace. "I'm glad you're alright."

He sounded like an old woman getting a visit from her grandson for the first time in nine months. Like there was a whole world between them, like there was a huge elephant of bitterness and loneliness in the room. Three days alone was probably more than Sirius could bear in a situation like that.

"Sirius, what's wrong?" he asked again, approaching. "What happened?"

Sirius avoided his gaze, made no move to get up and hug him as he usually did.

"Please sit down," he said wanly.

Remus stopped. "Sirius, you're scaring me. Has something happened to you?"

"Sit down," Sirius repeated emphatically. He still didn't look at him. Hesitantly he complied, pulled one of the chairs over and sat on the side of it, facing Sirius.

"Please tell me what's wrong," Remus repeated, keeping his voice low, concerned. Carefully, he placed a hand on Sirius's, who stiffened at the touch. But then, in a hesitant movement, he turned his hand and intertwined his fingers with Remus's. They were cold and sweaty, his grip firm, desperate. Remus stroked the back of his hand with his thumb.

"Fuck," Sirius said, running the fingers of his free hand over his forehead. He looked like he wanted to crawl into the nearest corner. He smelled of sweat, cigarettes, fear.

"I was hoping you already knew... that I wasn't the one who had to tell you." Sirius' voice sounded thin, he clung even tighter to Remus's hand, trying to make eye contact. He didn't last long though, his glazed, bloodshot eyes kept avoiding him as if Remus was blinding him.

Remus hoped he would get it over with soon. But he didn't probe any further, waiting for Sirius to continue talking on his own. It felt like an eternity.

"Three days ago, around afternoon," Audibly, he swallowed, then continued, whispering, "There was an attack."

Remus straightened, boring his gaze into Sirius. "By Death Eaters?"

Sirius closed his eyes and nodded. Then, without opening them again, he continued speaking as if reciting a memorised litany.

"Three days ago, Death Eaters raided the McKinnons' house. The whole family was there. There were no survivors."

Inwardly, he heaved a sigh of relief. *All right then, let's go.*

He found himself very convincing in his role. At the start, he threw in a little *What do you mean?* as if he was stupid, as if it wasn't completely clear what Sirius had said. Then, when Sirius had told him again, with tears in his eyes, that Marlene was dead, he lapsed into a stupor. Copied Sirius' daze, as if he couldn't process what he'd just heard. Heard Sirius talking at him, trying to comfort him, even though he probably desperately needed comforting himself. Let it bounce off him.

He read much of his reaction from Sirius's behaviour too. Sirius slid closer, seeking physical contact, as if afraid he might disappear. From that he gathered that Remus was someone who liked to run away when something like this happened. Who needed distance, seethed on his own. When he jumped up, almost knocking over the chair behind him, and indicated that he wanted to leave, it provoked a violent reaction.

No! Sirius grabbed him by the arm, rising from the chair for the first time and forcing him into a frantic hug. *Don't leave.*

Hesitantly, unwillingly, he let himself be hugged. Wondered if Sirius had said that because he was afraid for Remus to be alone or for himself.

Sirius clung to Remus as if this was their first and last hug ever. Many emotions clashed against him, it was overwhelming. His real flight instinct kicked, but he beat it down. His performance was not yet

over.

She's dead, he whispered, then again, then again, until he felt the tears in his eyes. He was glad he didn't struggle with it, that the tears always came when he conjured them, as if they were long overdue. He let them flow, as the old Remus probably would at this moment. Burying his face in Sirius's shoulder, while waiting, watching how Sirius further reacted and then mirroring him. It was like a game of chess, really. Only in this one side didn't know it was playing. And was therefore doomed to lose, in every way.

Eventually they ended up on the couch, holding onto each other, crying until it hurt. Sirius never let go of him even for a second, always touching him in some way, as if Remus was the only thing keeping him grounded. Remus took care of him, giving him the closeness he obviously needed so badly, while Sirius pretended to comfort Remus with it.

They sat together until late into the evening, not speaking a word, not moving from the spot. Sirius had rested his head on Remus' shoulder, silent sobs kept shaking him and Remus soothed them by interlacing their fingers or stroking his leg caringly. That was all he was capable of, all this closeness had drained him insanely. All because of that fucking asshole Crabbe.

Eventually, exhaustion caught up with Sirius and his eyes fell shut. Remus waited patiently until his breathing evened out and the tension drained from his shoulders. Then, gently, he disengaged himself from Sirius, got up carefully and laid him down on the couch. He didn't wake up.

Remus stretched extensively, wiping the last remnants of his tears from his face. He felt sore and tired. But the worst was over.

Hastily, he took advantage of the calm and unpacked his travel bag, stowing everything where it belonged. Afterwards, he made himself something to eat in the kitchen as quietly as possible to calm his wildly growling stomach. He thought about making something for Sirius too, because he seemed to need it, but he decided to put it off until the next morning. For now, it was more important that he got some sleep.

After eating, he wanted to wash up, but found only an empty bottle of detergent in the sink. Annoyed, he searched the lower cupboards for

another bottle, pushed pans and pots aside and finally stopped when among the cleaning buckets and kitchen rolls he found two empty whiskey bottles under the sink. Confused, he pulled them out and inspected them. They were no longer from his birthday, he had disposed of them long ago. And he hadn't bought any since then either.

He glanced through the open door into the living room, where Sirius was sleeping peacefully. A strange pressure settled on his chest, but he couldn't put a name to it. Hastily, he put the bottles back and closed the door, pretending he hadn't seen them.

A little later he gave up his search. He walked quietly back into the living room and looked at Sirius thoughtfully. He would prefer to leave him there while he slept. But he desperately needed to sleep himself and he didn't want to know how Sirius would react if he woke up in the middle of the night and Remus was no longer there. He couldn't squeeze onto the couch with him either, they had already found in the last weeks that this inevitably ended up on the floor for one of them.

In the end, he decided in favour of Sirius's mental well-being and against his back. Slowly, carefully, he reached under Sirius's torso and knees and lifted him off the couch. As he did so, he ignored his cracking joints and the pulling in his back. Sirius miraculously didn't wake up from that either, just slightly drew his eyebrows together and nestled against Remus's chest. With him in his arms, Remus staggered towards the bedroom, cursing the fact that there were stairs between them. Sirius was nowhere near his physical best, but even so, he was heavier than he looked. But when he had finally laid Sirius gently on the bed and relieved him of the most uncomfortable clothes, he knew it had been the right decision.

He tucked Sirius in, peeled himself out of his clothes and lay with him. The bed was so much more comfortable than the one in Grimmauld Place. That was the biggest advantage to his return; his joints would thank him for it. But whether it could outweigh all the other things, all the emotions that bit into his skin here, Remus doubted.

He slept restlessly.

***

The next few days were not easy. Neither for Remus nor Sirius, though for completely different reasons. Sirius was more lethargic than he had ever been. Even the smallest things seemed to take all his energy. Remus had to motivate him to eat, to shower, to call James, all while trying to grieve authentically himself. It was tedious.

Over the next few days, things slowly got better with Sirius, but on the day of Marlene's funeral, Remus still felt a little off. This time it was Sirius who had to persuade him to get up, and naturally he concluded the obvious.

"We can do this, Moony," he whispered, lightly stroking his chest.

Remus lifted his head and looked into his haggard, sad face. "Mmm."

Sirius bridged the distance and kissed him gently on the lips, it must have been the first time in days.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered afterwards.

"Sorry for what?"

"Everything."

Remus shook his head, feeling a slight throb behind his eyes. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Sirius. Not everything in the world is your fault."

Without waiting for a reply, he peeled himself out of the covers and stood up, staggering towards the balcony. The craving for a cigarette was overwhelming.

Afterwards he slipped into his room, swallowed the potion and picked out some black clothes. In the bathroom, he surveyed himself in the mirror and realised that he probably wouldn't really have to act out his inertia today. At least that was an advantage.

He took his time getting ready and by the time he came downstairs, Sirius had already made breakfast. A welcome change. Did he really look that bad?

They were silent as they ate, as they almost always were in the last few days. They had limited themselves to the bare essentials, like two flatmates in the first week after moving in. Only with the difference

that they slept in the same bed.

Afterwards, they put the dishes away in the kitchen just as silently and made themselves another cup of tea.

"How was your last mission, by the way? I didn't even ask anymore," Sirius awkwardly tried to start a conversation as they leaned next to each other at the kitchen counter.

Remus shrugged and took a big gulp. "Was okay. Bit more annoying this time. The pack I'm in is more suspicious. The leader wants me to prove myself first before he'll tell me anything."

"And what will you have to do?" Sirius didn't sound happy.

"I don't know, we'll see the next few times. But it won't be anything bad. Don't worry."

Sirius didn't quite seem to believe that, but he didn't appear in the mood to argue about it any further. Not today, anyway. Remus was glad of that.

After they finished their tea, Sirius changed as well and tied his hair back. He looked like he was prepared to go outside for the first time in days. Remus didn't even want to know what he would look like after the funeral.

They left the flat and took each other by the hand.

"You know where to go?" asked Sirius.

"Yeah, I know."

For a change.

***

The funeral was huge. No comparison to the quiet family atmosphere at the Potters'. There were an incredible number of people there, most of them co-workers or friends of Mrs McKinnon. Her death had also caused the biggest fuss, logically enough. She was the woman who

had caused all the problems for the Dark Lord. But a large number of guests had also turned up for Marlene's brother, most of them from his Quidditch team it seemed. A handful of Muggles seemed to be Marlene's father's close relatives, looking completely distraught at the number of people.

The group for Marlene wasn't very big either, but the sadness was so clearly written on their faces that it was hard to watch. Remus and Sirius stood with James and Lily. Lily was crying incessantly, James just looked terribly drained. Peter was there too, with his girlfriend Grace, a small woman with black curls and a dense pattern of freckles on her face. Peter was patting Mary's arm, who, like Lily, was completely distraught and crying into a handkerchief.

Almost everyone from the rest of the Order was there too, Moody among others. When their eyes met, Moody gave him a quick nod. Remus returned the gesture and then hastily turned away again to whisper something trivial to Sirius. Since Moody was so obsessed with the idea of a spy (and the McKinnons' murder would reinforce that suspicion), he tried to keep him at arm's length. He was already pushing Dumbledore's orders so he wouldn't have to go to meetings, so he didn't want to offer him an open flank on such an occasion.

A few steps away, between Alice and Frank Longbottom, Remus finally spotted Dorcas Meadowes. He had only met her once by now and had to look twice to recognise her. She looked as if she had aged years. She clung to Alice as if she would disappear if she let go. She did not cry.

He did not go to her, did not offer his condolences. She hardly knew him after all. She probably didn't even know that Marlene had told Remus about their secret relationship. And Remus didn't know whether he could banish the fact that he had contributed to Marlene's death from his face entirely at that moment. A risk he was not willing to take either.

Instead, he looked after Sirius, who was slumping more and more as the start of the funeral drew nearer. He patted him on the shoulder, squeezing out a few tears himself, even though for some reason it was harder for him today. Then he made the rounds, hugging all his friends, whispering reassuring, kind words to them and letting them pat his back in return. He tried to look like he had just lost his best friend. And hoped that the funeral would pass quickly.

It was a nice ceremony. Because of the good weather, everything took place outdoors, first under a large pavilion in which the four coffins looked oversized, and then afterwards at the graves. Remus helped carry Marlene's coffin, had a serious face on, and for some reason couldn't help thinking of the picture in his wallet. The one of the two of them. Happy, familiar. At least that's what the picture looked like. He couldn't remember any of it, after all.

At the graveside, the deceased's closest confidants lost a few more words. A long-time friend of Mrs McKinnon tearfully recounted shared experiences, all the good she had done in the ministry. Mr McKinnon's sister spoke of his skills as an artist, of his gentleness and his flair for the right words. A friend of Danny McKinnon's clutched a piece of paper and tried to talk about his great skills as a Quidditch player and his even greater heart, but he was quivering so violently that he could barely bring it past his lips.

Finally, it was Mary who spoke about Marlene. She appeared surprisingly composed, even though Remus knew it must look very different inside her. Her words were nice. If Remus were still able to feel anything, it would surely have made him sob as hard as Sirius and Peter beside him. Of course he played along, without question, letting out everything that wasn't there. Let Mary's words wash over him. About the selfless, self-critical, fun-loving Marlene who had put her friends above everything, who stood for everything the world needed today. How there would never be someone like her again. How no one would ever be able to fill the gap she left behind.

With that, she concluded her speech, stepping back into the crowd, her head proudly raised as if waiting for the wave of her own emotions to crash over her. It did not take long.

The coffins were lowered into the graves, the ceremony ended. Everyone still got their moment alone, everyone could pay their last respects. Remus and Sirius joined their friends at the back of the line, delaying the moment as long as possible. When they finally arrived at the grave and most of the other guests had already left for the funeral feast, Remus and his closest friends gathered around Marlene's grave. Sirius took Remus by the hand and Remus allowed it, surprised at his openness. Probably his need for support was greater than his fear right now.

Remus didn't know how long they stood there, each absorbed in their own thoughts. Remus let his gaze wander over her gravestone. It was plain, just as she would probably have wanted it. Her name was

stamped in large letters, along with the date of her birth and death. And below it, in large black letters, was written:

You live in our laments. You do not die in the heart.

Remus stared at the inscription for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'You' by Keaton Henson

We're in act two now! I'm excited for it. There's a lot to come.

See ya! :)

Chapter 20: No Love Go

Chapter Notes

CW: Emotional Manipulation, Swearing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Break, break my heart

Make love to my soul, tell me what you've found

Please, please leave

I think we've had enough and it's bringing us down

With an annoyed groan, Remus crumpled up the half-finished letter and threw it into the bin next to the desk. It was his third attempt and he just couldn't get it shit together to write a few coherent lines for Dumbledore. Just writing what he had discussed with Rodolphus, it wasn't that hard. But he couldn't get a clear thought, he had such a *headache*.

"Still no progress?" asked Sirius pityingly, leaning in the doorway with his arms crossed.

Remus shook his head irritably. "Disaster."

"Don't drive yourself too crazy. You've still got a few days before you have to send it. You can try again tomorrow."

Remus hated leaving things unfinished. But if he tried any harder, it probably wouldn't end well for the furnishings in his room.

"Maybe you want to go for a walk? The fresh air will help clear your head," Sirius suggested.

Remus looked out the window, into a slightly cloudy sky. "Maybe not a bad idea."

He turned his head back to Sirius, whose gaze went past him to the dresser.

"Oh," he made, smiling uncertainly. "You fixed it?"

Remus followed his gaze and took a moment to understand what he meant. "Er, yeah. Bothered me." He became uneasy as Sirius continued to fix the dresser like that, with the box in the bottom drawer.

"I see." Sirius looked ... disappointed? Remus couldn't follow.

"Do you want to come?" he asked therefore, trying to steer the subject away from the dresser.

After a long drawn out look, Sirius finally nodded and smiled crookedly. "Of course."

***

They apparated to the vicinity of Remus' full moon hut. It was so remote that no one would disturb them. They climbed cross-country through broken branches and rotten tree trunks until they found a small forest path. Sirius grabbed Remus's hand, as he had two weeks ago at the funeral, and strolled along with him between tall spruce trees. The clear air actually helped him with his headache. The stinging gave way to the now familiar throbbing behind his eyes. His thoughts sorted themselves out again. When they came to a clearing where the sun was breaking through the treetops, he stretched his face towards the sun and closed his eyes. For some reason, that reminded him of Marlene.

"Too bad we couldn't spend a full moon together these past few months," Sirius sighed, seeming to enjoy the sun just as much. "It's always been nice here."

"Yeah... and we've been together." Remus thought of his last few lonely full moons, some locked in the basement of Grimmauld Place, some alone in some strange forest. The wolf hadn't liked it.

"Right," Sirius said, squeezing Remus's hand. "We were together."

They walked on, leaving the clearing behind them. In the background they could hear birds singing and soft rustling as a mouse crept through the undergrowth. It was peaceful.

"Has there been any news of the ... incident?" asked Remus cautiously. It had been a few days since the last Order meeting, but Sirius was still so unsteady that he hadn't dared ask about it yet.

Sirius' gaze grazed the ground. "No, nothing. No one knows how this could have happened. The location of the house was top secret."

Attack is the best defense. "That does reinforce Moody's suspicion that there must be a spy."

"Yes, that was the point of the meeting too. Have been puzzling over who it could be. With no results, of course."

"Are they going to use Veritaserum or something? Probably the only way to really get clarity."

Sirius shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think so. I think some would see that as a breach of trust, even if they're innocent. Like Podmore or Bones, they're far too proud to be interrogated like that."

Remus tried not to let his relief show. Three cheers for male pride. "It'd be really stupid if they didn't do it just because of that."

"I'm honestly not a fan of it either," Sirius kicked away a rock that was in the way. "Had a lot of bad experiences with Veritaserum or mind reading..."

Remus looked at him, hopefully understanding. "I can imagine that. It's easy to abuse."

"And the Order should not stoop to that level."

Your pride will be your downfall.

"Also true. I'm sure there's another way."

"We'll just have to be careful to share as little information as possible from now on. No more big visits to other members. No small talk. It's best to stick to the basics."

"That sounds good," Remus said optimistically. Yet he knew it wouldn't work, the Order was too gullible for that, still. It wouldn't be long before Remus had his next high profile victim on the hook. It was only a matter of time.

After a while, they sat down on a sturdy-looking cross-grained oak trunk and listened to the birds sing. There was something meditative about it.

"Marlene could probably name every bird here for us just from hearing them sing."

Sirius' words brought Remus out of his thoughts. It was the first time he'd spoken her name since the funeral. A good sign. Even if it was just such a trivial thing.

"Yeah, she knew a lot about it," he said.

"She was always more interested in animals than people, even with the magical creatures in school," he continued, picking up a branch from the ground and beginning to pluck off the individual needles. "She would have made a great magizoologist."

"I'm sure she would have, yes."

Sirius was apparently not bothered by his blank answers, on the contrary. He continued to talk about her for a while, a wistful expression on his face, and didn't seem to need an answer from him at all. It was his way of grieving, and it was fine with Remus, as long as it kept him from lying apathetically in bed like he had in the first days and getting on Remus's nerves.

Eventually he would weep and Remus would comfort him, breathe light kisses into his hair. Waited until his tears dried up, it was the usual game. He passed the time thinking about his next mission.

***

His headache became worse in the days that followed. He tried tablets from Peter, three different sports, more walks, and even meditation. None of it helped. And it was beginning to affect his mood.

"Gosh, Sirius, what's so hard about cleaning up your shit? You've got a bloody wand, it'll cost you a second!"

Remus set his plate clattering beside the sink, looking at the mess on the kitchen counter, the streaks and leftovers from cooking. He didn't have the nerve to help clean up his mess, not today. Not while a

thousand little knives were maltreating the top of his skull.

Sirius, probably startled by the unusual sharpness in his voice, appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. His eyes fell on the countertop and he frowned.

"Wow, okay, yeah sorry. You can say that in normal tone though."

Remus took a deep breath. "I'm saying it in a normal tone. It's just annoying that you never do it. I don't know how many times I've cleaned for y..."

"Alright," Sirius interrupted him, another annoying habit of his. "I get it, I'm cleaning up." His tone sarcastic. The way he waved his wand carelessly and the counter cleaned itself in seconds, dishes floating into the hanging cupboards. As if it was a nothingness, an overreaction on his part. Did Sirius really not *understand* his problem? Or was he just trying to provoke him further?

If so, it was working.

Sirius caught his gaze, furious and aggressive, and snorted ironically. "What's the matter with you? Are you on your period?"

"Shut up!" hissed Remus. "That stupid line was never funny."

Now, at the latest, anger crept into Sirius's face as well. "What's your problem right now? I forgot to clean, I'm so sorry. You don't normally give a shit, do you? Why are you suddenly acting like a poor version of my mother?"

"Watch your mouth! You're the one who's still acting like a fucking child who can't even get the most basic things done by himself!"

That hurt Sirius, Remus could see it. For a moment, the anger stumbled from his face.

"Fuck you!", Sirius hissed, after having regained control of his features. "Stop being such an asshole!"

"Welcome to my world, *Padfoot*," he continued to mock, unable to stop. "In case you haven't noticed, that's who I am!"

"You're acting like a complete idiot. Tell me what your problem is or just shut the hell up."

"*You* are my problem! Your immature behaviour, all your fucking

whining ... It's unbearable sometimes!"

No wonder it feels like my head is going to burst. You make everything so unnecessarily complicated. I wish I could just get you out of the way.

Sirius took a step back, puzzled, and said nothing back. Remus felt the anger inside him continue to seethe, heard it as a rumbling voice continuing to berate Sirius, completely out of proportion to the situation.

"What the hell..." whispered Sirius. His eyes were wide, bewildered. Remus's inner voice faltered. Only slowly did it seep into his head what he had just said. How uncharacteristic and destructive he was. But how else could he be with those fucking *nails* in his head?

"You're out of your mind," Sirius continued as he slowly regained his composure. With it, the anger came back, hurt and cruel. It made his features harden. "You know what? Go fuck yourself." And with that, Sirius stomped off.

Remus didn't track where he was going, was completely preoccupied with himself. Aggressively, he massaged his temples, crouched down, closed his eyes. Like a crescendo, the pain had swelled, becoming almost unbearable. For several minutes, which felt like hours, he swam in it, desperate for relief. Then, eventually, the clarity returned, small and restrained, and the pain shrank. When Remus opened his eyes again, the flat was silent. Sirius was gone.

What the absolute hell were you thinking?

***

Remus spent the rest of the day pacing around the empty flat, inwardly slapping himself. The headache hadn't gone away completely, even a cold shower and five cigarettes hadn't changed that. But he was weak enough to let his mind work. To let him realise that he had fucked up. Grandiosely. He knew exactly what Sirius's insecurities were and he had thrown them at him, for no reason. He was such an idiot.

As evening fell and there was still no sign of Sirius, Remus grew

increasingly uneasy. Would he spend the night with James and Lily? Was it that bad? Remus felt the need to call them, just to know where he was, but he stopped himself. Maybe he was just seeking some time for himself and would be back a little later. But he would definitely be back. For sure.

When it was after midnight, Remus finally forced himself to go to bed. Sirius continued to stay absent, even in the hours that followed, as Remus tossed and turned restlessly in bed. Had he blown it already? Had that small burst of honesty already been enough to scare Sirius away?

These questions eventually led him into a fitful sleep that lasted into the early hours of the morning, until, just after sunrise, the door to the bedroom opened.

"Get the fuck out of my bed," Sirius demanded in a raspy voice as Remus instantly shot out of sleep. Perplexed, he looked at Sirius, who appeared over-awake, his hair oily, his face flushed. He was swaying slightly.

"Have you been drinking?" asked Remus dimly, probably not the best question to introduce their reunion.

"Piss off," Sirius repeated, his voice sounding washed out. "Believe it or not, the unbearable crybaby wants to be alone."

Remus had five different sentence starters stuck in his throat, all of them more or less revolving around the phrase *I'm sorry*, but the way Sirius was looking at him brought him away from it. Nothing he would say now would have any chance of getting through to him. Not when he was this drunk.

"Alright, alright," Remus said, flipping back the duvet. Sirius turned away from him and peeled out of his clothes, Remus could smell the booze all the way to him. He hesitated, giving in to his urge.

"Sirius..."

"One more word and I'll curse you," Sirius nagged, successfully silencing Remus. He gave up and left the room, closing the door behind him with a soft sigh. This was not good at all.

***

October 11, 1973

Sirius and James have discovered girls for themselves. Super annoying, they talk about nothing else anymore. James has now announced for the third time that he wants to marry Lily Evans, one of our year. Not at all over the top. She also seems rather put off by it (who can blame her). Peter tries to have his say too, even though he's not really the type for that. I find it all totally strange. What do I care about girls???

***

Not a sound was heard from Sirius's room until late afternoon. For Remus, time passed agonisingly slowly. At one point he got annoyed with himself. He was a killer, for fuck's sake. A Death Eater. And now he was shitting himself for biting his token boyfriend's ego? Embarrassing.

Still, he couldn't help but think about it constantly, fuelled by headaches and an insatiable thirst for action. He couldn't do it without Sirius, he couldn't get any information without him. He was vital to his mission. He had to fix this.

When Remus finally heard the stairs creak, he froze in his chair and stared at the book he had opened in front of him as a cover. If Sirius asked him, he wouldn't even be able to tell which book it was. But as he stomped down behind him, Remus fixed it as if his life depended on it. He didn't dare look at him.

He heard Sirius trudge wordlessly behind him into the kitchen and fix himself something to eat. Remus tried to make something out of the corner of his eye, but the angle of the dining room table to the kitchen was not ideal. So he had little choice but to wait, once again, and speculate as to whether Sirius would even join him at the table.

In fact, he did, shortly afterwards. A plate of rich food and a cup of coffee in his hands, Sirius trudged over to the dining table and sat down opposite him. Silently, he began to eat. Carefully, cautiously, Remus looked up from his book, regarded Sirius. The hangover was written all over his face, but he didn't look as destroyed as his state this morning would have suggested. Was he ready to listen to him

now? At least he was sitting at the table with him, facing him. It almost seemed like an offer, an invitation. Remus had to try.

"I'm sorry about what I said yesterday," Remus began straightforwardly, watching Sirius' reaction closely. Nothing. He continued to eat as if he had heard nothing. Remus didn't know what to make of it. At least it was better than being interrupted and shouted at. Wasn't it?

"I was a mean prick." He searched for the right words. "I was unnecessarily testy and I took it out on you and it wasn't okay."

Still nothing. Damn. He was going to have to dig deeper into the emotional repertoire on that one.

"I don't know where that anger came from either...I didn't even recognise myself." He pushed the book aside and interlaced his fingers. "I just want you to know that nothing I said was meant that way."

Sirius's gaze shot up, just for a millisecond. He didn't believe a word he said.

"Believe me. I knew what to say to make you angry. That's why..." He sounded like an asshole. He should have thought better of it. But he honestly hadn't expected to get this much of a chance to talk either.

"I'm sorry, Sirius, I really am," he brought his sad attempt at explanation to a close. Sirius continued to eat unfazedly, looking more than ever like the rich, unapproachable noble he never wanted to be.

Remus looked at his hands. Did Sirius want him to burst into tears here, begging on his knees for forgiveness? It wasn't as if Remus couldn't do that. But it seemed a bit over the top to him, also in relation to old Remus. He couldn't push the tear-jerker too hard, it wouldn't be believable.

"Say something," Remus whispered, continuing to stare at the tabletop. Let his eyes moisten a little, just a little. Sirius looked at him, eyed Remus's spontaneous artwork.

"What do you want me to say, Remus?"

He didn't say it angrily, it sounded like an honest question. Small blades began to scrape the top of Remus's skull.

Fuck, he thought. *Not again.* He tried to ignore it.

"What you think. Whether you forgive me, or what I can do to help with it?"

Sirius took a sip of coffee, continuing to hold the cup, gazing at the dark liquid. "I don't think about it very much. You didn't tell me anything new yesterday. I just always hoped you thought more of me than I did."

"I didn't mean it."

"Angry people are usually scarily honest."

Remus shook his head vehemently, ignoring the wild throbbing behind his eyes. "Anger doesn't make you honest, it only makes you cruel. I would never think about you like that. You're better than me, in every way."

Sirius looked at him thoughtfully. There was something melancholic in his gaze.

"You've changed," he observed. He tried to say it matter-of-factly, but Remus heard the pain. It was not a good thing to hear Sirius say, but then again, what had Remus expected after that stunt? Even Sirius must have realised by now that something wasn't quite right with him. Now he had to make the best of it.

"I know," Remus breathed, beginning to knead his fingers. "It's all... a bit much for me right now... I don't know where my head is." He really didn't.

Sirius clutched his coffee with both hands now, the skin under his fingernails standing out white. "I can understand that. Been a bad few months."

His words sounded exhausted, indicating that Remus wasn't the only one feeling that way. New pain clawed its way into Remus's head all at once, so fiercely that he grimaced. He tried to disguise it as sadness.

"I know, it's still not an ex...cuse.", He rubbed his eyes. "I just want you to know...I don't want to lose you because of my problems, not you too."

Sirius shook his head gently. "You're not losing me. I'll be with you as long as you still want me."

"I don't like the way you say that," Remus remarked, but Sirius said

nothing more about it, just smiled wanly. All these impressions, Sirius' words, his implications, his doubts, it was driving Remus mad. He felt something inside him approaching, like the next crescendo, the next wave. But this time Remus would not make the same mistake. Hastily he stood up, to Sirius's surprise, who looked at him with wide eyes.

"I'm sorry, I need to ... I need ... can we talk later?"

He didn't even wait for an answer, already running upstairs, away from Sirius, out of harm's way. Once in his room, he slammed the door behind him, yanked open the window, drew the curtains. Then he hurriedly took off his shirt and trousers, threw himself onto the bed, pulled the covers up to his chin. Shakily he took a breath, trying to get his body and mind back under control. He didn't know what had overtaken him, it was different from the sheer rage of the day before. But it was no less overwhelming, or less painful. He pressed his hands to his forehead, curled up in a fetal position and prayed it would subside soon. What the hell was going on with him?

A soft knock made the dread inside him rise immeasurably.

"Moony?", Sirius' voice was soft. "Are you alright? Can I come in?"

Why did he suddenly have to be the overprotective boyfriend again? Couldn't he sulk for a few more minutes, at least until Remus could think straight?

"Yeah," he muttered quietly, nevertheless. He heard Sirius close the door behind him and the mattress lowered itself to the edge of the bed. A hand rested on his shoulder.

"Can I lie down next to you?"

Remus was glad he was lying facing away from Sirius, otherwise he probably would have seen everything fall out of his face. Sirius *wanted* him to lose his mind.

"Yes," he replied, even more quietly. Sirius heard him anyway, of course. He lay down with him, even under the covers, snuggling up to him from behind, wrapping his arms around him. It was very quiet, Remus hearing nothing but his own loud heartbeat and Sirius's soft breathing against his ear. His flight instinct screamed out, louder than ever before.

"Everything's alright. I'm not angry with you anymore," Sirius whispered. "I love you."

Remus was unable to reply.

"Look at us", Sirius continued and Remus heard his tentative smile through these words. "We really are a bunch of miserables."

I will be, if you don't leave me alone.

"We really need to create more nice memories together," Sirius pressed against him. "I think if we don't, we'll both end up completely broken."

There's nothing left in me to break.

I am a sculpture of broken pieces, made up of what you once knew.

None of it can feel your love.

He turned in Sirius's embrace, out of impulse. It was a mistake. He was far too close to him. His face, his gaze, his skin, it was overwhelming.

He should not give in now. Not when he was like this. Not when his...

"How about we start with that right now?" breathed Sirius, and every thought inside Remus came to a halt. He took a shaky breath, smelled Sirius' mesmerizing scent, looked into his dark eyes that looked right through him. Something fought his way through the pain, a realisation, clear as day, irrevocable:

He *wanted* him. So fucking bad. He wanted to possess him, devour him, make him his own. He wanted him more than anything. More than he could stand.

He kissed Sirius fervently, pulling him roughly against him. Everything in him roared, everything trembled. There was nothing but chaos. But then there was Sirius, returning his touches, creating a way through it, taking him by the hand.

He felt like he was high, moments blurred entirely before his eyes, others he saw crystal clear, in brilliant colour and detail. He saw Sirius' red-kissed neck, heard his loud breath in his ear, felt the body beneath him tense, surrender to him. Then it all blurred again and Remus was carried away on a warm wave, letting it happen, not thinking, not feeling, just being.

They were not gentle with each other. Remus didn't know if it was the previous argument, Sirius's grief or Remus's inner turmoil. They let it

all out. Remus especially, pushing everything else aside, until there was nothing left, nothing more than Sirius's and his body and their desperate attempt to become one.

Afterwards, Remus carefully sank to his side to give Sirius air to breathe. He wiped the brown strands from his sweaty forehead and closed his eyes for a moment. The headache was gone, it felt like heaven on earth. Was this what happened when he surrendered to the strange wave? If he let himself fall, stopped fighting? He didn't want to know.

"Fuck," Sirius breathed, then chuckled softly. "Holy hell."

"Mmm," Remus agreed, while he could still hold on to the last strands of bliss. He felt Sirius stir beside him, pressing lightly against him.

They lay like that for a while, in the too small bed, in the too dark room. And the headache returned like a boomerang, dull, heavy, final. He could forget his theory.

"I meant what I said about fond memories, by the way." Sirius sounded hoarse.

"Oh?" muttered Remus, absently. He wanted a smoke.

"Yes, and not just in bed. We should devote more time to the good things."

"Like what?"

"You could show me some of that Muggle stuff James was talking about the other day. Then I'd learn something and we'd both have a bit of a break from the war."

"You mean like cinema and stuff?"

Sirius stroked his arm. "Something like that, yeah."

Remus shrugged, paralysed by the onrushing tornado of thoughts he could no longer resist. "Why not?"

***

For Remus, the rest of the day, short as it was, passed excruciatingly slowly. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, tense, shaky. The worst part was that he still couldn't say, *why* he felt all of that or where it came from. It was like his body was in alarm mode, fighting off something he didn't know was there. It was torture.

As soon as he could even justify it, barely dark and still far too warm, Remus took off for bed, glad for the time he had alone there. As he lay in Sirius's bed, feeling the cool duvet on his bare legs, he let the tension fall away from him for the first time in hours. Being away from Sirius did ease his mind, strangely enough.

You're playing with fire.

Regulus's words crept unexpectedly into his ear, and he didn't know why. He shook them off, lay on his side, fiercely closing his eyes. Everything was fine. He was only tired. Nothing a good nights sleep couldn't fix.

It took a long time, before his mind finally went quiet. Giving way to something else.

Something.

Pain?

No, not pain, endless agony.

Regret.

Hopelessness, fear, hatred, grief.

Or at least my idea of it.

Tears. But from whom?

"I will remember for you."

Then,

a blue light,

fragmentation, irreversible.

A manic laugh.

Blackness.

"Moony? Hey, wake up!" Remus snapped his eyes open, scooting upwards. He was breathing heavily, as if after a marathon, his heart racing.

Sirius grabbed him reassuringly by the shoulders, lowering him gently but firmly back onto the pillow.

"Did you have another nightmare?"

Another? Remus grabbed his face, wiping the sweat from it in disbelief. He didn't dream, ever. That was, that was...

What was that?

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'No Love Go' by Jesse Mac Cormack

:)

See ya!

Chapter 21: The Good Left Undone

Chapter Notes

CWs: None :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All because of you

I haven't slept in so long

When I do I dream

Of drowning in the ocean

Longing for the shore

Where I can lay my head down

Inside these arms of yours

"Wow, what happened to you?" Regulus tried to sound relaxed as he hurriedly tucked the Jobberknoll feathers into the drawer. Lupin had stormed into the room without knocking and really deserved the question. He looked a mess.

"Have you finished the bloody potion?" hissed Lupin testily.

Regulus pointed to the vials that had been ready on the worktable for days. "Sure thing."

"Good." Lupin trudged over and began frantically replacing the vials in the box.

"Um... You want to talk about it?"

Lupin wheeled around to face him as if Regulus had just thrown a rock at his head. "Do I look like I wanna talk?"

Regulus shrugged. "You always look like shit. I haven't figured out the nuances yet."

Lupin glared at him and then turned away again, shaking his head, peppering the empty vials so hard on the plate that Regulus was surprised none of them broke.

"Maybe I could help?" Regulus even surprised himself with his friendliness. But he had to know if *that* was why Lupin was so down. If it was really happening that fast.

Lupin propped himself up on the countertop, the next insult obviously already on his lips.

"...Do you have anything for a headache?"

Regulus tried to sound casual. "What kind of headache?"

Lupin gestured wildly with his arms. "What the hell do I know? A headache, dammit! Feels like someone's trying to split my skull. And it's getting worse."

"How long have you had it?"

Lupin thought for a moment. "About two to three weeks now. At first I wasn't sure what of it was still the stress over Marlene's funeral. But it's slowly driving me out of my mind."

Regulus nodded innocently.

"Do you also have... hallucinations or something? Or weird dreams?"

Lupin looked at him for a moment. "...No. Just a headache. Do you have anything for it or not?"

Regulus considered. A headache was a sign that his new potion was effective. But if he wasn't having dreams or remembering yet, maybe the dose wasn't strong enough yet. Or was it just taking a little longer? *Long-term, continuous stimulation of the brain,* the book had said. Maybe he just needed to be patient a little longer.

"Sure." He thought about whether he had anything pain-relieving that wouldn't cancel out the Hellebore effect. Finally, he reached into one of his shelves and pulled out a corked, bulbous glass. He held it out to Lupin, who took it hastily.

"A sip a day is enough. Eases the pain." He was glad that Lupin still seemed to trust him so much. It was probably only a matter of time before he identified the transformation potion as the culprit. But even

so, he'd find another way to get that shit into him. No one was safe from Regulus when he set his sights on a target.

And he wanted Lupin to *remember*. Wanted him to know what he had lost. Just like the author of the *Oblivion Spells* book, Regulus couldn't be content with just accepting Lupins fate. And he didn't want to worry about James's safety all the time or risk being exposed for revealing Lupins fate to him. If there was a slight chance of saving even the smallest part of Lupins soul, he would take it.

And he prayed that it would be enough.

"Thanks," Lupin murmured, taking the first sip directly. Regulus watched him silently, his shaky fingers, his nervous look. For a small moment, he didn't look like Voldemort's killing machine. The deep-seated loathing that had been sitting in him since Lupin had tortured him lost a little sharpness for the first time.

"How's everything else going? Got your new target yet?"

Lupin looked at him confusedly. Granted, Regulus found it strange too, talking to him like a normal person. But somehow he had to keep the trust.

"Uh, yeah. Tomorrow, though, when the full moon is over, I'll get more specific information."

"So who's the lucky one this time?"

"Edgar Bones is his name. Only officially joined the Order a few weeks ago. The dark lord can't stand him. The whole family."

"Oh, his death sentence." Regulus was glad the name didn't ring a bell this time. The thing with Marlene still bothered him, even if he had only known her fleetingly.

"Probably," Lupin agreed, a little calmer by now. The potion seemed to be having an effect.

"How long do you think Voldemort will let the Order last, anyway? So far it's been a good way to get important politicians and information. But at some point he will surely tire of the constant resistance. At some point, he'll order you to kill everyone, even the little sheep and newcomers. When do you think that will happen?"

Regulus watched very closely to see how Remus reacted. He, however,

just looked at Regulus for a long time and didn't let on at all. "I don't know. Couldn't care less though, I'm ready whenever he is."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Regulus said, smiling wryly. He didn't like not being able to tell if Lupin was lying or not. He was good at it, at this little game. Regulus's equal, perhaps.

***

Over the next few days, Regulus hardly saw Lupin. He seemed particularly eager, taking any job he could get, ending or ruining someone's life so that Voldemort would be proud of him. Regulus was just glad to have his peace at home during that time. That way he could devote himself to the things that he didn't necessarily want everyone to notice, but which had been occupying his mind for weeks.

As soon as the coast was clear and his stupid mother was out of the house he slipped into the library and fetched the little black book. He didn't dare keep it with him for any length of time, not when Kreacher was always so overzealous in tidying up and passing on whatever came into his head. But even he was busy now, sweeping out the fireplace, certainly for the next hour or two. He was completely undisturbed.

The book about Horcruxes was also one of those very general essays, sometimes it even seemed as if the author himself didn't know exactly what he was dealing with. Nevertheless, Regulus was so caught up in the first paragraph that he couldn't put it down.

Death is considered man's last, indomitable opponent. The Tale of the Three Brothers already taught us, that death is not to be trifled with. But whoever reads this and still, still feels that inner urge to find a way to outwit it and be victorious, might find what they are looking for in this book.

Regulus had no intention of conquering death, not at all. He had resigned himself to the fact that it would eventually overtake him, sooner or later. He wasn't afraid of it, not any more. But knowing how

he *could*, that had an attraction all its own. The knowledge was forbidden, dangerous. And that only made it all the more interesting to Regulus.

Horcruxes were quite vile things, he quickly realised. It wasn't something you wanted to think about for too long, yet Regulus somehow had to, all the time. This time as well, reading about which ceremonies were best for making Horcruxes, he thought about it, wondering who the hell would volunteer to do that to themselves.

The knock on his bedroom door was completely unexpected and nearly made him jump six feet in the air. He shoved the book under the covers and stumbled to the door. A widely grinning Barty was waiting for him in front of it.

"Bloody hell, you know I hate unannounced visits."

"Sorry," Barty replied good-humouredly. "Don't worry, it's not an assignment this time either." His voice sounded a little strained.

"What then?" Regulus regarded his friend warily. He seemed a little strange.

"Oh, I was just wondering if you'd like to hang out with me for a bit."

"Hang out?" Regulus wondered briefly if he had heard Barty correctly.

"Yeah, right. You know, a bit like the old Hogwarts days. We could roam around London a bit, just get out and about."

Regulus toyed with the idea of laughing and refusing, but something made him hesitate. Something about the look on Barty's face. He looked like he would burst into tears if Regulus didn't agree. He thought back to his last encounters with him where he had been in a similar mood.

"Uh, okay, yeah. But not for so long, I still need to prepare some things for the gathering tonight."

"Sure, sure thing!" said Barty hurriedly, looking relieved. "Do you need more time or can we go right away?"

Regulus motioned him to calm down. "Give me five minutes, I need to change clothes."

Barty nodded and waited outside the ajar door like a dog wanting to

be walked. Regulus had a faint inkling of what was going on with him, but he preferred to wait and see if Barty would finally jump over his own shadow and tell them of his own accord.

A little worried that he now had to leave the Horcrux book so unprotected under his bedspread, he took one last look in the mirror and then joined Barty, who already seemed to know exactly where he was going.

He apparated them behind a tree, in the middle of Kensington Gardens, near the Round Pond. It was a cloudy day, but there were still a lot of people. Mostly older couples and families. Regulus and Barty stood out like parrots.

Eventually they settled down amid the sprawling lawns, away from potentially aggressive swans but still overlooking the Pond. Regulus sat back, propped on his elbows, waiting for Barty to come out with his concern.

"Oh man, we really don't do enough together lately. Miss our time at Hogwarts."

Regulus took a deep breath. "Barty," He saw his friend tense noticeably.

"Out with it."

Barty sat cross-legged, half turned away. He didn't look at Regulus.

"You really are way too smart sometimes."

"You sure don't make it hard, either." Regulus tried to sound relaxed, but Barty didn't go along.

"I really have no idea where to start."

"Anywhere, it doesn't matter. As long as you finally do."

Barty smiled shallowly at that. "I've never been able to do that. At least not when it comes to the important stuff."

Regulus was amazed at this self-reflection. Where had the childish, carefree Barty gone?

Barty began plucking out individual blades of grass and throwing

them aside. "I don't know what to do."

Regulus followed his small, frantic movements, waiting for more.

"I think... sometimes I... ah fuck." He rubbed his face.

"Is it about your mother?"

Barty's gaze met his for a moment, looking almost grateful.

"Yes," he said. "It's about her."

"Is she sick?"

Barty snorted, sounding snide. "Depends on who you ask. My father would give you his letter and seal on it, but I think ... it's just because of him."

"What do you mean?"

"He makes her sick. She's always been anxious, ever since I was little. But he's become unbearable in the last few months and that's why she's getting worse... She's had some nervous breakdowns, really bad ones. And now my father wants to admit her. Indefinitely."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh'." Barty sounded bitter. "I've told him countless times, but he won't listen. He thinks she has some incurable disorder. And I'm beginning to get the feeling my mother believes him."

"Does that mean she wants to be hospitalised too?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Not yet, she wants me with her. But it probably won't be long before he has her ready."

"Did you say anything against it?"

Barty snorted again, looking at him meaningfully. "You know my father well enough. He has a lot in common with your mother. Would you openly disagree with your mother?"

Regulus didn't have to answer that, Barty already knew. Parents could be the worst scourge. They didn't let go of you as long as you lived.

"I can't bear him any more. With my mother gone, I can't stand to be in that house another second."

"Then leave," Regulus said, immediately earning a frown. "Don't put up with it. It would be good for you to have no contact with him anyway, he's high on our enemies list."

"And where am I going to go? He can find me anywhere, can't he?"

"Come to me," Regulus said lightly. "You are always welcome at my place. And your father wouldn't dare come there."

Barty seemed speechless. "Are you sure? Won't your parents ...?"

"They won't mind. Death Eaters come to stay with us all the time. You're one of us. And you're my friend."

Barty looked at him with wide eyes, looking so completely different from how Regulus usually knew him. A small, frightened boy.

"That ... that would really be..." He struggled for words.

"Not an issue. I'm here for you, you should know that. At least since I saved your ass that one time you and Evan accidentally set fire to the greenhouse with, remember?"

That made Barty laugh. "That's right, I'd almost forgotten about that."

"I didn't. I'll have the stench in my nose for the rest of my life."

Barty's laughter grew louder, a sound Regulus hadn't heard in a long time. It sounded nice.

"I don't even know how I deserve you, Reg," he finally said, looking at the calm water in front of him. "This is such a relief right now, you can't even imagine."

"Yes I can," Regulus said. "I can very well."

Barty turned a little, now facing him. "True. After all, you too have parents who'd do anything to prevent you from being happy."

Regulus smiled. "Nicely put." He watched a group of teenagers stroll past them. They had beer and snacks in their hands and were laughing themselves silly over some story. They were barely younger than him and Barty and yet he felt infinitely old when he saw their carefree faces.

Barty looked after them too, his gaze resting on a girl doubled over in laughter, holding her stomach.

"Have you ever been like that?" he asked vaguely. "Like, really?"

Regulus forced himself to look away from the Muggles. "What do you mean?"

"Happy."

Regulus thought about it.

"I don't really know," he said. Then added, hesitantly, "Once, maybe."

"What was then?" Barty looked at him curiously.

"I'm not telling." Regulus smiled apologetically. Barty looked displeased.

"Why not? You're not usually so secretive."

Oh, if only you knew.

"Because it's mine alone."

Because that one moment is sacred, and fragile. Because sometimes it's the only thing that gets me up in the morning. I won't taint it, I won't share it with anyone. It's all I have left.

"All right." Barty sounded piqued. He had to live with that.

"Well, but it's nice that you've finally opened up to me." Regulus steered the conversation back into more pleasant channels. "It wasn't that hard, was it?"

"It was awful," Barty grumbled and Regulus laughed.

***

"Reg, please listen to me, please." James grabbed Regulus' arm but he shook it off roughly.

"Just don't, okay? I knew it was a shit idea." Regulus was tired of this conversation. He just wanted to be alone. That was all he had ever wanted.

"No, it wasn't!" James was talking so fast that Regulus could barely understand him. "It wasn't a shit idea, and none of it was your fault! I

fucked up and I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. But please - please," He visibly struggled to find the words, "Please let us stay friends."

"We're not friends, James."

For a second, all air seemed to leave James and Regulus felt a faint twinge in his chest. But then James put on his defiant face, just like the day they had met.

"Then what are we?" It sounded challenging, but also bitter. Regulus hated that he could already hear those nuances in James's voice so well. He should have ended this farce much sooner.

"We're both lonely. This," he gestured back and forth between them. "Was just convenient. I should have realised sooner that you were starting to read too much into it. That was my fault. Now leave me alone."

"No," James said. "I know you don't mean that."

"Then you're an idiot. Piss off, Potter."

The sound of his last name made James wince. He looked at him as if he'd slapped him across the face. The twinge in Regulus' chest grew stronger.

"You know you can't get rid of me Reg, I'm not leaving until we make up."

Regulus was about to draw his wand. "You are insufferable! Just fucking accept it already, I want nothing to do with you!"

James, ever emotional and hot-headed, just looked at him and shook his head.

"Why don't you stop lying?"

The problem was, James also knew him far too well by now. Why had Regulus allowed this to happen?

Why had he let James Potter into his life?

Regulus opened his eyes.

He was standing in front of his mirror, probably for far too long. In full Death Eater robes, about to set off to the gathering. Actually, he had only wanted to collect himself for a moment. But James always

slipped into his thoughts at exactly these moments. When he got careless.

It was getting pathetic. The time had long come to finally move the fuck on.

He'd have to go through with it eventually.

***

The Death Eater gathering was similar in structure to the last time. The *subordinates* gathered in front of the gallery, in a semicircle, shoulder to shoulder. Waited for their saviour, the one who knew the way, who told them what the truth was. Regulus was by now quite disillusioned with it all, yet he could not deny that Voldemort knew how to use his words. You hung on his lips automatically, wanting to believe what he said, wanting to do anything to please him. Regulus himself had fallen for it long enough.

So too this time. Voldemort floated from the gallery, surrounded by a dark aura and wearing a winning smile. He welcomed a new member to the ranks, this time not hooded like Lupin had been last time. Severus Snape, that complete idiot.

He was kneeling in their midst, being circled and appraised by Voldemort. He had his head raised proudly, his greasy, stringy hair visible to Regulus even at a distance and through the dim green light. It had only been a matter of time before he joined them, he had been almost as big a fan of Voldemort as Bellatrix in his school days. Regulus found him obnoxious.

"Are you willing and ready to sacrifice your life for the good of pure blood?" began Voldemort his usual questions. Regulus watched him circle Snape like he was his prey. Sometimes he didn't seem human. Like something that imitated a human, but was actually something much darker, something forbidden. His deathly pale face, his sunken cheeks, his big black eyes. Inevitably, he couldn't help thinking of what he had read only an hour before:

Creating a Horcrux requires the death of a human being. No more, no less.

But one should be aware that a splitting of the soul does not pass you by without a trace. It makes one immortal, at least in the sense that one cannot be killed by others. But some would say that half a soul means half a life. Some can even see it, in the eyes of the immortal. That there is something missing. Something vital.

Regulus looked into Voldemort's eyes, long, longer than ever before. They had no life in them, had never had it. It made up a large part of his menace. Regulus had long wondered what was wrong with him, what made him so unbelievably scary. But now that he had those lines in his head, it all suddenly made awful sense. He froze, unseen beneath his robes, clawing his fingers into the cool fabric. He watched Voldemort give Snape the Dark Mark, smiling contentedly. The smile didn't reach his eyes, they were dead.

Voldemort had created a Horcrux.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'The Good Left Undone' by Rise Against (my 12 year old self would be very proud of this song choice. :P)

So Regulus is learning the truth. Let's hope he won't get reckless with it…

Hope you liked the chapter! Actually planned to upload yesterday but I'm having a very stressful week so I had to adjust my 'schedule'. But next chapter should be up in a few days. :))

See ya!

Chapter 22: Sketching

Chapter Notes

CW (Allusive) Problematic Drinking Behavior

See the end of the chapter for more notes

„What do you do“, Mr. Keuner was asked, „If you love someone?“

„I make a sketch of the person“, said Mr. K., „and make sure that one comes to resemble the other“

„Which? The sketch?“

„No, the person.“

"Are you sure this was a good idea?" asked James as the waitress approached them. A young woman, barely older than them, a broad smile on her face.

"Well sure, it can't be that hard," Sirius waved it off and put on his most charming smile.

"Do you know what you want to drink yet?" the waitress asked, handing them the menus. Her gaze lingered on Sirius.

Sirius accepted the cards with a friendly wink and asked charmingly, "Do you have butterbeer here?"

James gave a suppressed sigh as the waitress frowned. "Er, no, not as far as I know."

Sirius wasn't fazed by this. "Too bad."

James shook his head. "Sorry, he's not from around here. We'd like two London Pride."

"Coming right up," the waitress chirped, replacing the ashtray on their table before walking away with one last look at Sirius. With a quiet smile, he watched her go.

"Butterbeer, Pads? Are you serious?"

Sirius shrugged. "Thought Muggles had that, too. They do have whiskey, don't they?"

"You really do live under the rug sometimes. And that's saying something when I say it."

"Lily's shown you a few things and already you're getting arrogant! That's why I really wanted to meet you here. Broaden our horizons a bit."

"Sure." James opened the menu and began to read. Sirius did the same. It was a pretty run down place, so they had mostly fried stuff and pizza. That was exactly how Sirius had imagined it. The full London Muggle experience.

"I've agreed with Moony that we're going to address my deficit for a bit. He wants to show me a few things now. Then you won't have to be ashamed of me when we go out for dinner."

James looked up for a moment. "Oh, very self-sacrificing of Moony. Good luck to that."

"Now, everyone stop acting like I'm fucking stupid!" Sirius crossed his arms. "It's perfectly natural that I wouldn't know such a thing. My father would faint if he knew I even set foot in this dump."

"Don't be mad, Padfoot, we're only joking," James smiled and closed the menu. "Have you decided what you're having?"

"Probably the hamburger," Sirius said. "Moony's not a big fan of those, so we never make them."

James gave him a slightly odd look before nodding and pushing the menu aside. "I'm going to get fish and chips, I'm going full-on magic tourist."

"Wonderful," Sirius grinned, closing his menu as well. He didn't quite know how to move the subject away from small talk.

"How are you?" he therefore asked cautiously at first. Emphasised it so James knew it wasn't just a polite phrase.

James shrugged his shoulders. "All right, I guess. Sleeping better again. But there are always bad days."

Sirius nodded in understanding. "And Lily? How's she getting on?"

"Similar. It was good that we weren't alone. Talking helps."

Sirius stared at the scratched table. The familiar heaviness came back whenever he thought of Marlene. It had been well over a month now. The wound still gaped open as much as it had on the first day.

"And how is it with you? How are you getting on with ... coping?"

"Slowly," Sirius admitted. "But I'm sure it'll be fine, eventually. I think."

James reached across the tabletop with one arm and squeezed Sirius's hand. "I'm sure it will."

At that moment, the waitress returned with their beer and set it down on two coasters. "What can I get you?"

Sirius and James gave up their order and the waitress disappeared again with springy steps.

"How's Remus doing? Is he coming back from his mission soon?"

"Scheduled for tomorrow. I hope it stays that way. Always a bit... uncertain."

They took their pints and toasted. Sirius took a sip. Didn't taste bad at all.

"I can imagine. Do you know anything more specific? What exactly he is doing?" James took a small sip as well before putting the beer back down.

Sirius looked apologetically at him. "Sorry, I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

That seemed to hit James harder than expected. He backed away a little and nodded, one of those nods where you raised your chin instead of lowering it. As if he had taken note of something he didn't like at all.

"I see."

It hurt Sirius's soul. They had never kept secrets from each other. And now... now Sirius was almost beginning to lose count. He felt the urge to make up for that.

"But I have something else I want to tell you." Sirius lowered his voice, maybe uncharacteristically for him. It was enough to get James back to the edge of the table. Sirius took his hands off it so James couldn't see him kneading them restlessly. Was this really a good idea?

"What's up?" James smiled encouragingly at him, even though he had no reason to. Sometimes Sirius wondered how he had earned this boy as a best friend.

"So I, um..." He took one deep breath to stop that awkward stammering. "Me and Moony... er, we have a... thing. Going on."

James frowned. "What do you mean?"

You really want to torture me, don't you?

"We've never officially discussed it or anything... But you could say we're... together. Like... dating." Sirius felt like the ultimate idiot as he said this. He barely dared to look at James. Prayed he would take it well.

James didn't let on. Was that a good sign or a bad sign?

"Oh," was all he made, after what felt like an eternity. "Since when?"

Sirius thought about it, nervously. "Around Moony's birthday, it started. But I didn't want to... blurt it out like that. Had to come to terms with it myself first." Sirius wasn't sure he'd managed that yet. Probably his bloody mother had successfully ensured that he never would.

It took another painful second, but then, abruptly, a very Jamesian grin spread across his face. "Wow Pads! I really didn't expect that. But congratulations! You're a good match."

Sirius didn't quite dare go along with the positive reaction yet. "You really don't mind? I know how important our group of four has always been to you. We had no intention of sabotaging it or anything... it just... happened."

James shook his head vehemently. "Oh nonsense, what do you think of me? It's all right, I'm happy for you both. It's nice that you've found each other in the midst of all this shit."

"Yeah, I don't think I would have made it through the last few weeks without Remus."

James lowered his gaze, taking a big gulp of the beer.

"Well, who made the first step? You, surely? Remus is far too shy for that, isn't he?" He continued to grin at Sirius, though it looked a little crooked.

Snorting, Sirius shook his head. "Me? Absolutely not. Up until six months ago, I would have sworn on being straight. Remus did it, believe it or not. Caused a huge crisis, as you might imagine."

James chuckled, this time it sounded genuine. "I can imagine it very well. Never thought you'd ever turn your back on boobs either, to be honest."

Sirius shook his head regretfully. "That's the most tragic thing about it. I don't think I'll ever quite get over it."

James laughed. "But you've got Moony now. That's not a bad substitute after all."

"No," Sirius said, smiling gently. "The best."

Shortly afterwards, the waitress brought them their food. The hamburger on his plate was huge, just as Sirius had hoped. Eagerly, they started eating and didn't talk much for a while. They had had the silent agreement since school that mealtime was mealtime and that talking only disturbed it unnecessarily.

They had devoured the food at similar record speed and after Sirius had drained his beer, he leaned back, breathing heavily, and put a hand on his bloated stomach.

"I think I'm dying."

James gnawed unwillingly on the last of his chips and nodded, exhausted. "But it was worth it."

Sirius groaned and put a hand over his mouth. "We should come here more often."

James pushed his plate away and leaned back as well. They sat in silence for a while, both trying to survive. Then at some point, James said almost casually. "I have something to tell you too."

"What?" Sirius looked out for the waitress to order another beer.

"I proposed to Lily."

"WHAT PLEASE?" His apathy completely forgotten, he shot forward, pressing both hands on the table and staring at James with wide eyes.

James laughed uncertainly. "Yeah, a few days ago. She said yes."

"AND YOU'RE JUST TELLING ME THIS NOW?" Sirius noticed out of the corner of his eye how a few heads at the next tables turned to look at him, but he didn't care.

James looked embarrassed. "Yeah, sorry. It wasn't spectacular or anything. I've been toying with the idea for a while and then it just came over me."

"Oh my god," Sirius said, grabbing his head. "Crazy." Realising that was perhaps not the best reaction, he rowed back. "Congratulations, of course! It was only a matter of time with you two anyway. But..."

"I know," James rubbed the back of his neck. "It's quite sudden. We haven't even been together that long. But after everything that's happened... it just felt right. Our time may be limited, so we should make the most of it, right?"

Carefully, he looked at Sirius and Sirius knew he had to say the right thing now. Because James was right, it was bloody early for a wedding. Then again... who knew how long they all had. Clocks ticked faster in war.

This time it was him who padded James's hand. "I think so too. It's the right decision. You're meant for each other. Make the best of it all."

James looked relieved. "Thanks, I'm glad you think so too."

"Sure thing." Sirius finally caught sight of the waitress and raised two fingers eagerly. "Another two from London Prides or whatever they're called."

The waitress nodded. Sirius slapped the table with the flat of his hand. "James, we need to celebrate this! When's the wedding?"

"We're aiming for towards the end of summer. Septemberish."

"In three months already..." Sirius could hardly believe it. They were getting old.

"Would you like to be my best man?" asked James, so casually again.

Sirius couldn't put into words how happy the question made him. For a moment, it was as if there was no Voldemort, as if there was nothing bad. For a moment, all was well.

"What a question." He tried not to make his emotion quite so obvious. He couldn't start bawling like an over-emotional aunt right now. "Of course!"

"Great," James said, as if they had just agreed to go to the next Quidditch game together. Sirius couldn't believe it.

"I hope you realise we're going to have to drink on that today," Sirius said matter-of-factly as the next two beers landed on their table.

James raised his hands in surrender. "Well, if Sirius Black decides that, what choice do I have?"

Sirius took a large sip, satisfied. Maybe this was his new favourite beer.

"None at all."

***

It wasn't going to be a binge or anything like that, they both didn't feel in the mood for that. Nevertheless, they sat down in a bar and drank a few beers, talked about everything, more than they had done since Hogwarts. It felt like old times, with only Remus and Peter still missing. They enjoyed watching the Muggles sitting around them, more or less drunk, and even got into conversations with a few of them.

The one thing that stuck in Sirius's mind the most, however, was a group of punks he spotted outside smoking and probably stared at like the last creep. He knew it was stupid, but some part of him had always thought that all the rock and punk bands in magazines and posters just wore costumes. But in London there were actually people who walked around like that. Tattooed, pierced, made up, ripped clothes, colourful mohawks. Even though Sirius wasn't a big fan of the hairstyles, the rest of the look and the vibe that these people had... Sirius fell in love with it that night.

Or maybe it was just the alcohol.

When Sirius pulled the front door shut behind him a few hours later, he could still hear a strong hum in his ear, a faint echo of the loud music that had gone through him earlier. They really needed to do it again.

Staggering, he took off his shoes and stumbled up the stairs. He was pleasantly drunk, considerably more pleasant than after his recent argument with Remus. He didn't even want to think back to that, it hadn't been a good night. The alcohol had helped though, at least a little. It always did him good, made him float, everything seemed a little less gloomy. Right now was the best example. He was happier than he had been for a long time. He had almost forgotten what it felt like.

He managed to shower and brush his teeth. Tomorrow-Sirius would be grateful for that. Exhausted, he strolled to his bed afterwards and let himself fall into it, sighing heavily. It was time for Remus to come back. He slept better when he was with him.

Or slept at all.

***

Every time Remus returned from his missions, Sirius felt like Atlas with a sky made out of fear lifted from his shoulders. The tension vanished, he breathed more freely, could think more clearly again. He was a different man.

Remus was different too when he returned, a little more each time. Not in a good way, though. Sirius tried to ignore it, but he found it increasingly difficult. He was sure that Remus was still so reluctant to talk about his missions because they weighed on him. He never talked about the things that were bothering him, it was his worst habit. But Sirius could see it, his inner struggle. It made him sad to see what a mere year in the Order had already done to him. And to know what it had done to himself.

How much longer was this going to last?

He put all his love into his smile as he stood before Remus. Remus looked tense, his eye line narrowed as if he was being blinded by light. But he was fine, that was the most important thing for now. Sirius hugged him, feeling his warmth with every pore and his hands on his back as he eventually returned the hug.

"Welcome back."

"Mmmh," Remus hummed into his shoulder, not letting go for a long moment. They were the most beautiful moments with him. The quiet ones, the close ones. It felt like salvation. As if peace existed only this way. Only in his arms.

"Is everything okay? How was the full moon?" asked Sirius cautiously.

Remus slowly broke away from him. "All good. Full moon was fine, had my new pack after all. They're actually quite nice."

He kissed Sirius and then put an arm around him, steering them to the couch where they settled down next to each other. Remus stretched extensively once and let his head fall backwards onto the cushion. Exhausted, he closed his eyes.

"Do you know when you have to go back yet?"

"The next full moon. Could be a longer stay this time though."

"How much longer?"

Remus shrugged. "A week, maybe two."

Two weeks?

"I see..." Sirius tried not to look too shocked.

Remus lifted his head and looked at him compassionately, cupping his face with one hand. "We'll get through it. It's for a good cause, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." Sirius looked down at his lap. Fuck, there went his good mood.

He felt another hand, this time on his shoulder. "How have things been with you the last few days, love? Did it work out with James?"

"Yes," Sirius forced himself to smile, hoping it didn't look too fake. "You're not going to believe this, we went to a Muggle restaurant for dinner."

"Oh wow, really? And you didn't have to obliviate anyone afterwards?"

"Nah, we were practically indistinguishable from Muggles."

"*Wow*, I'm thrilled."

"Oh, and", Sirius grabbed Remus exitedly by the knee. "I haven't told you the most important thing yet."

"What's that?"

"James and Lily are getting *married*. This summer!"

Remus's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Sirius nodded eagerly. "That's how I reacted at first. He proposed to her a few days ago."

"Wow, quite a surprise," he seemed to think about it, "But great for them. I'm sure it'll be a beautiful wedding."

"Definitely! James asked me if I could be his best man."

Remus stroked his hair and kissed him on the cheek. "Wouldn't have expected anything less."

Infatuated, Sirius looked at Remus, trying to hold on to the warm feeling the words triggered in him.

"Are you hungry?" he asked Remus eventually, as it was about to fade away.

"I'm starving."

"I'm sure I can do something about that." He rose and pointing vaguely towards the kitchen.

"Could you maybe make me some more tea to go with it?" Remus added. "Something calming, I'm feeling pretty... rattled."

"Sure thing." Sirius said, tenderly. "Had that much stress on the assignment?"

"You could say that, yes. Had a few minor altercations with other packs. Nothing wild, though. We were clearly superior. Now they won't get in our way anymore." Remus smiled meaningfully.

"That's good," Sirius said, smiling back. "Dumbledore can really be grateful to have you working for him."

"Oh, definitely."

Sirius locked eyes with Remus for second, before turning away and heading towards the kitchen. He tried to uphold his smile, but it grew increasingly heavy, somehow. Something seemed to constrict his throat, but he couldn't put a name to it. A vague dread that crept ice-cold through his veins. He was almost certain that it was the fear about Remus's next departure, it was the only logical explanation.

But it still wouldn't quite let him go.

Chapter End Notes

Quote: 'Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner/Stories of Mr. Keuner' by Bertolt Brecht (one of my favorites out of the book. Pinpoints exactly Sirius‘s feelings towards Remus)

Finally some fluffy James & Sirius. Those two deserve all the love <3

Hope you liked the chapter! Working on getting the next one out by Monday.

See ya! :)

Chapter 23: My Soldiers

Chapter Notes

CW Depiction of Violence/Injuries, Blood, Swearing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I build a wall and blow up the bridges

Let systematically suppress every thought of you

Have the photos burned and the songs censored

Come what may, I must never lose control again

It was breaking hot. In mid July, even rainy England said goodbye to the eternal clouds and showed itself from a better side. At that time, the whole country seemed to be on break, at least the Muggle part of it. They were loitering outside in the streets, in the city centre, constantly making you feel like you were missing something. Really annoying.

Sirius had suggested going to a lake, just the two of them. The first attempt at their new, 'beautiful' experiences, although thankfully still without a concrete Muggle connection. Remus let himself be talked into it, partly because he couldn't think of a suitable excuse on the spot. He feared that the result would be another terrible headache, since Sirius seemed to be one of the triggers for it. But Sirius was so exited about the trip that Remus didn't really have a choice.

He didn't know the lake they apparated to, but that wasn't surprising. It was some lake in the Scottish Highlands, surrounded by green, grassy hills. Between a loosened group of trees that offered at least a little shade, they settled down and spread out their stuff. Sirius immediately stripped down to his swimming trunks and lay down on the soft grass, stretching.

"Great," he muttered. "And the best thing is, apart from a few confused

hikers, no one ever comes here."

Remus rummaged in his bag for the sunscreen. "So, you've been here before?"

Hopefully not with me.

Sirius nodded, his eyes closed. "With my brother." He didn't explain further, and Remus certainly wasn't going to dig any deeper. When he found the sunscreen, he nudged Sirius lightly. "Come on, put some on. Otherwise you'll be bright red in fifteen minutes."

Annoyed, Sirius groaned, but relented. With the extra layer of sunscreen, he was even paler.

"You really need to see sunlight more often," Remus commented as he also stripped off his clothes and applied a thin layer of lotion to the most important areas. It wasn't as if there was anything left of his skin to be ruined.

Sirius looked at him for a moment, slightly puzzled, before averting his gaze.

"Well, you don't have to tell me, you have to tell the weather."

Remus observed Sirius, who was now staring towards the water.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing!"

"You sure?"

"Yes." He smiled broadly. "Can you pass me one of the water bottles from the bag?"

"What's the matter?", Remus said reprovingly. "Tell me."

"Its really nothing. I'm just glad that... you're getting more 'confident'. With... you know, taking your clothes off in public."

Sirius said it so stiltedly that Remus almost had to laugh. He pointed across the unsightly scars on his chest, "Yeah, I guess I'm slowly coming to terms with them. And it's not like many people here will see them."

"It's still progress, though. You wouldn't have done this last year,

would you?"

"True." Remus shook his head inwardly. There were few things he cared less about than his junk body. He had more important things to deal with.

Sirius touched him on the upper arm, gently rubbing some leftover sunscreen. "I'm really glad. You're beautiful, I wish everyone could see that."

Wow, so sentimental. Remus suspected Sirius expected a kiss now, so he complied. Hesitantly at first though, waiting to see if the headache returned, if his mind clouded over. But there was nothing. They made out for a while, Remus took that well too. He really couldn't figure out his head sometimes.

At some point Sirius jumped up and pulled him into the water with him. Remus didn't particularly like swimming, but at least the water would cool him off. He had barely waded in up to his waist though, before Sirius splashed him with a load of water, his most devious grin on.

"Let's see what you've learned after last time!" he shouted challengingly and began to maltreat him from all sides. Remus really didn't feel like getting involved in this child's game at all, but by now he was an expert in playing pretend. With a twitch of his eyebrows he accepted the challenge and it didn't take long until they were chasing each other around, dunking each other in the water like a couple of ten-year-olds. Sirius had his fun and Remus tolerated it, as he tolerated so many things.

When Sirius finally fell exhausted into his arms and let his giggling go, Remus exhaled in relief. Gloom, or exuberant love, that was no problem for Remus to fake. But this childish easiness, this light-heartedness that Sirius had kept somewhere between all the sadness, these always pushed him to his limits. Sometimes he was really glad that Sirius and James were losing those qualities more and more due to the war. They were definitely easier to handle that way.

Even here in the water, pressed close together, they kissed intimately. It didn't seem to bother Sirius that they were outside the protection of the trees and that everyone could theoretically see them. Another indication that he was slowly coming to terms with it, slowly gathering the courage to be himself. *Lovely.*

Irrelevant.

Later, they were lying lazily on the grass again, Sirius had put his shirt over his face and was trying to doze. Remus was alternately thinking about his numb arm, on which Sirius had rested his head, and how best to tell him that he would soon be disappearing again for two and a half weeks. Roberts, his next big catch, was coming up. And half a dozen more troublemakers, but they would be a lesser challenge. They had been preparing for this for weeks, this time it wouldn't be such a debacle as with the McKinnons.

"What do you gift for a wedding?" asked Sirius languidly at one point, stopping him from bringing up the subject for now.

Remus snorted in amusement. "You're thinking of that now?"

"For some time already." He carelessly wiped a stray ant from his stomach. "I've been to far too many weddings of random relatives. But I never paid attention to what my stupid mother gave away."

"Hmm." Remus was definitely not the right person for this.

"So what did you give your father when he got married?" asked Sirius.

Remus tried not to tense up too much. What wedding? Had his father remarried after his mother had died? Was he still alive? Was he still in contact with him?

"I, uh... my father... he never liked presents very much." Remus cleared his throat.

"Wow, very helpful. Next time I'll ask my guitar, It'll be just as useful for me."

Remus pinched Sirius's side, earning a mixture of sharp intake of breath and breathless laughter.

"What? I'm right."

Remus followed up with a tickle, making Sirius' whole body quiver.

"Stop that!" Desperately, he tried to grab Remus's fingers, not quite succeeding. In the process, his shirt slipped off his face, exposing heavily flushed cheeks. Remus stopped his torment and tilted his head in amusement.

"I hope for your sake the blush is from the heat and not sunburn

already."

"I suspect the worst", Sirius muttered, straightening up and grabbing the sunscreen. Remus took the opportunity to shake out his numb arm.

"Next time I'll get the special sunscreen for super sensitive babies. Maybe that will help."

"Very funny." Sirius creamed himself so thickly with the lotion he looked like the new band member of KISS. Remus decided not to make fun of it.

After Sirius was done, he lay back down on the grass, back on Remus's arm, which had just started to tingle, and put the poor shirt back on his face.

For a while there was peaceful silence. Remus watched the water surface gently rippling in the wind.

"You told James, didn't you?" he asked eventually.

"Told him what?"

"About us, I mean." Remus clarified.

Sirius took a while to answer.

"Yes," he finally said. "When I had lunch with him."

"How did he react?"

"Good. Very good, actually. I was very relieved."

"That's good."

"How did you figure it out? Did he take you up on it?"

Remus smiled. "No, I just had a feeling."

You're just too easy to figure out.

Silence. Had that sounded too weird?

"It's nice that you're becoming more confident too," Remus threw in, so it didn't stretch for too long. "That you're becoming more accepting of yourself."

Sirius shrugged. "Doesn't feel like it, if I'm honest. And there's not much more we can do than this anyway. At least, if we want to be left in peace."

He intertwined his fingers with Sirius's. "I don't mind keeping it that way. We'll tell our friends and the rest can go fuck themselves."

Sirius pulled his shirt off his face with his free hand and turned his head to the side so he could look at Remus. His gaze weighed heavily. "It shouldn't have to be like this, though."

"Oh love, it is what it is."

"I hate it."

"Me too," Remus laughed. "But that can't stop me from doing," he breathed a kiss on Sirius's lips, "this."

"That's good." His face came closer and Remus could see the blush already fighting its way back through the layer of sunscreen. "Don't ever stop doing that."

"Okay." Remus kissed him again.

***

November 4, 1973

Sirius turned 14 yesterday. We celebrated by pranking Snivellus. Nothing wild, just a few pustules on his gigantic nose. It was still enough to make him completely tick off in the middle of the great hall, it was awesome. In the evening we had a bit of a party in the common room, didn't go on long though. Mary, Marlene and Lily were there again, it was fun. For girls, the three of them are actually quite alright.

Lately, though, other girls have been hanging out with us, mainly because of Sirius. They literally adore him, it's super obvious and annoying. Of course, I also realise that he's good looking, but they still shouldn't hit on him so crudely. He's a marauder, he's one of us. They should get in line.

***

"They can't be serious," Sirius hissed, annoyed. He handed Remus the unfolded paper, looking more than displeased. "Look at this!"

Remus accepted the plan, glanced at it and pretended to understand any of the codes on it.

"Oh wow," he commented dryly, handing the plan back as soon as it seemed somehow believable.

"Right?", Sirius picked up his words wildly, even interrupting the drag on his cigarette for that. "They're really starting to overdo it with my shifts. I need a break."

"Is there that much outage?" he asked cautiously. He knew Sirius wasn't really allowed to talk about the meetings anymore. But then again, it was Sirius.

He nodded. "Oh, yes. Last week, some Death Eaters ambushed the Prewetts. The Prewetts won, of course, but they got hurt in the process. They'll be out for a few more days. Sturgis is ill, and Moody's away on some important assignment. We're really short-handed."

"Did Moody say where he was going?"

Sirius shook his head. "He's hardly saying anything lately. Getting more and more mistrusting. I think he's plotting something with Dumbledore, but I don't know what. He's been getting a bit on my nerves lately."

"Understandable," Remus muttered thoughtfully. What were the two of them planning?

"I'm sure we'd have more people if Moody wasn't the way he is. He puts even me off sometimes."

Remus stubbed out his cigarette. "Probably people are more scared now of Voldemort. He has done a lot in the last few weeks."

Sirius nodded and looked up at the sky, the last traces of his sunburn visible in the direct sunlight. "By now, really, no one is safe. Every day I wonder who will be next."

Thomas Roberts. And say goodbye to Edgar Bones too, the rat will be next.

"Could be any of us," Remus muttered.

***

On a particularly sultry evening, during Sirius' third late shift in a row, Remus sat down at the dining room table and worked out the schedule for next week's reconnaissance mission with Rodolphus Lestrange. He had already done the hardest part and talked to Sirius about the upcoming absence, but now he had to make sure he performed properly in front of Voldemort.

He lost himself in it, hardly noticing how time passed. It was only when a resounding clap of thunder rang through the flat that he jumped up, noticing that it had gotten dark. He glanced at the clock - almost 9 pm - and frowned. Shouldn't Sirius be back by now?

Outside, heavy rain began to fall, pelting against the window. Remus rubbed his strained eyes, switched on the light and put his papers away. Then he picked up the shift plan again, which lay folded on the coffee table. He still couldn't decipher the letters, but the numbers above were simply Roman. There were four shifts, the late shift was titled XIV-XX. 2pm to 8pm. Remus lowered the plan. Strange.

When he still hadn't heard anything an hour later, he reluctantly decided to call James. It wasn't five seconds before he heard his busy voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes?"

"James? It's Remus."

"What's up?"

"Have you heard from Sirius? His shift was only supposed to go until 8pm, but he's still not back."

"Shit."

"So neither have you?"

"No. Who was on shift with him?"

Sirius had told him that for sure, but Remus couldn't remember. And the hieroglyphics on the shift schedule were of little help either.

"Don't know right now, don't have the schedule handy. Do you have

it?"

"Yes, hold on." Remus heard a rustle on the other side of the line and waited patiently.

"He was out with Dorcas. In Diagon Alley."

Oh, with the vengeful monster, then. Remus had only overheard it through Sirius, but Dorcas seemed to be completely out of her mind. Bitter, aggressive, the whole lot. Not the best partner for a shift.

"Something is not right. But no Patronus has come yet either. I think I'll contact Moody."

"You do that. Want me to come over?"

"No, no, you really don't have to. I'll... I'll see who I can reach first. I'll get back to you."

"Okay..." James didn't sound convinced. *"Please don't worry too much. I'm sure it'll clear up in a minute."*

"...Thanks James."

"Bye."

Remus hung up and settled thoughtfully on the couch. With Dorcas in the Diagon Alley? That really didn't sound like a good combination. Were they so desperate in the Order that they let this unstable woman do shifts? And Sirius wasn't in the best of mental states right now either....

A green light suddenly filled the room and Remus's head shot towards the fireplace. A deeply bent figure stumbled out of it, coming to a staggering halt, barely able to stay on his feet.

"Sirius!" shouted Remus as he recognised him. He jumped up and rushed to him.

"Remus," Sirius gasped chokingly, staggering. As soon as Remus reached out for him, he dropped into him, at the end of his tether. Overwhelmed by the weight, Remus stumbled backwards a few steps, but caught himself again and held Sirius firmly. His clothes were wet, he was shaking all over.

"What happened?" asked Remus as he cautiously manoeuvred Sirius towards the couch.

"Attack," was all he could get out. Remus sat him down on the couch, knelt in front of it and looked at him urgently. Only then did he really recognise the state his face was in.

"Shit," he whispered, carefully pushing a few strands of hair out of Sirius's face. His left eye was bright red, completely swollen shut. A deep cut ran down the side of his left cheek, and there were traces of dried blood down to his neck. Seeing that there was also blood on his thin jacket, he carefully removed it and examined his upper body. Worse.

"Sirius, what happened?" he asked again, more insistently, as he stared wide-eyed at the gigantic bruise on Sirius's stomach.

Sirius lay down carefully, his face contorted in pain. "I need to rest."

Remus shook his head vehemently. "You need to go to the hospital, now."

"It's nothing life-threatening... don't worry."

Remus didn't believe a word he said. "Don't take the piss out of me. You're bleeding internally!", he ranted, rubbing his suddenly throbbing temples.

"Moony," Sirius sounded infinitely exhausted, "Please, I just want to sleep."

Angrily, Remus clenched his fists. "Tell me what happened."

"What do you think?" croaked Sirius, annoyed. "A fucking Death Eater attack."

"Just like that?" Remus felt the anger rising rapidly.

Sirius closed his intact eye wearily. "Yeah. Dorcas and I were doing our rounds... one of them saw us. I guess he had it in for me...especially."

Remus straightened slowly. Everything started spinning.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know, he was masked."

Remus's body trembled. "I'm taking you to St. Mungo's. Right now."

Sirius's healthy eye opened again. "No, I-I can take it. You know how much I hate hospit-"

"No," interrupted Remus harshly, being done with Sirius's false pride. He picked he up off the couch over his reluctance. He didn't know why, but Sirius seemed considerably lighter than before.

His headache grew worse by the second. And with it the overwhelming urge to punch something.

He apparated outside the hospital and took Sirius to the emergency room. They didn't have to wait for long until the doctors picked Sirius up, examined him and confirmed to his relief hat the wounds were not life-threatening. They nevertheless wanted him to stay overnight for monitoring. Remus wouldn't have accepted anything else.

"You can rest easy now," Sirius muttered, so drugged up from the potions that he didn't notice Remus was doing the complete opposite. His head was throbbing harder than it had in weeks.

"I'm off for a minute," Remus said almost mechanically. "Getting your stuff."

"Thanks," Sirius muttered, already on the verge of dozing off.

Remus disappeared straight out of the room, although that was strictly forbidden. He didn't fucking care. His path led him straight to 12 Grimmauld Place, where he marched to the front door and kicked it several times with his foot.

The stupid house elf opened the door. "What can I do for you?" he asked calmly.

"Get Regulus here immediately," he hissed, about to draw his wand.

"Master Regulus is busy right now, he can't see you."

"Are you deaf?" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Now!"

"Master Regulus cannot receive you at the moment." He refused to be ruffled.

"You fucking ...!"

"What's that noise?", Remus heard Regulus's familiar voice from down

the hall. Finally.

"Master Regulus," the elf said obsequiously, bowing. "Has Master Regulus finished his research yet?"

"Who's at the door?"

Regulus came into Remus's field of vision, dressed in unfamiliar casual loose clothes and with unkempt hair. He looked at Remus and took a hesitant step forward. "What are you doing here?"

"Will you let me in?" he asked, knowing full well that he stood no chance against the house's defensive spells otherwise.

Regulus looked at him. Finally nodded, hesitantely. That was all Remus needed. Roughly, he pushed the house elf aside, stepped over the threshold, grabbed Regulus by the collar and rammed him against the wall.

"Fuck, what are you doing?" gasped Regulus, trying to loosen Remus's iron grip with his hands. "What's gotten into you?"

"Which one of us was in Diagon Alley tonight? Who started the fight with the Order?"

"In Diagon Alley?" Regulus paused in his resistance for a moment. "I think Evan... Why? And what fight?"

Remus stared at Regulus. "Where is he?"

"In the living room... He and Barty are..."

Remus didn't let Regulus finish. Instantly he let go, shook out his hands and stomped towards the living room.

"Stop, Remus, what are you doing? You can't just..."

Remus pushed open the door, silencing a roar of laughter that had resounded through the room earlier. There were two guys about his age sitting on the couch, who turned to him with wide eyes. One of them had dark brown, messy hair and tired-looking eyes, but Remus didn't give him a second thought. He focused instead on the other, the one with the long face and broad nose, who had small splashes of blood on his leather jacket.
"What in the fucking..." the unimportant one, Barty, began, while Remus was already bridging the distance and fixing Evan, like a

predator his prey. Evan seemed frozen in place, watching Remus walk towards him, his mouth half open.

"Remus Lupin?" he asked, shocked, just before Remus's fist hit him square in the face. Chaos erupted. Barty screamed out, yelled something, Remus ignored him, through the haze of his pulsing head. Regulus ran at him, screaming too, but Remus didn't give a shit about that either. In his world, there was only this pathetic little wretch in front of him, blood shooting out of his nose after just that one little punch. Remus wasted no time, flung Evan off the couch, knelt on him, kept punching, enjoying every blow, every drop of blood that landed on him. He had it coming, for that... that he....

Someone shoved him off Evan, again with a pointless scream. He was yanked away from him, with an iron grip, though he fought it tooth and nail. He wasn't done with this bastard yet, he would personally make sure he ended up in hospital as well.

"*What the hell is wrong with you?*", Regulus shouted in his face so loudly it reached his deaf ears. He shook Remus, glancing over and over at the bastard writhing on the floor, just as he should be. Only slowly did Remus's brain begin to work again and over the rush of his blood he was able to process what had been said.

"Reg, explain this to me!" exclaimed Barty, kneeling down beside Evan. "What is this fucking half-breed doing here? Why are you letting Remus Lupin into your house?"

"He's one of us," Regulus nagged aggressively, tightening his grip on Remus. "I'll explain in a moment. Take care of Evan."

"You've got to be kidding!" shouted Barty, leaning down over the bastard, grabbing him lightly by the shoulder. Evan's face was already swelling, blood everywhere. It filled Remus with satisfaction. It was such a balm that he even allowed Regulus to push him out of the room and angrily force him to sit on the stairs.

"Do you have any idea what you just did? Have you *completely* lost your mind!?" Regulus looked like he was about to slap him.

Remus just shrugged. "He deserved it, the son of a bitch."

"What did he do anyway?"

Remus paused for a moment. His headache was making it hard to think. "He attacked Sirius."

Regulus' head jerked forward, stunned. "What are you saying?"

Renewed anger flared in Remus. Was he really that slow?

"Your fucking friend attacked Sirius. Cursed him, or beat him, I don't even know. He looks terrible. I just gave that asshole some of his own medicine."

Regulus looked at him, still completely uncomprehending, and then slowly shook his head. There was something happening behind his eyes, but Remus was far too angry to decipher it.

"You... you..." Regulus took a deep breath and restarted. "Give me two minutes and I'll sort that out in there first." He gestured to the living room. "You stay where you are, understand? We need to talk in detail in a minute."

Remus shrugged his shoulders in annoyance. "I don't have forever. And certainly not to wait for you to pat that bastards shoulder."

"I'm not patting his shoulder," Regulus said sternly. "I'm just making sure not every bloody Death Eater knows your identity by tomorrow, you idiot."

That actually silenced Remus. He hadn't even thought of that.

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Regulus had shipped him off to the library, probably the dustiest and most abandoned corner in the entire house. Had sat him down like a petulant child in one of the prehistoric armchairs and settled down opposite him. Crossed his legs, put on a scrutinising look.

"Did you obliviate them?" asked Remus.

"No, I didn't," Regulus replied indignantly. "They're my friends, I would never do that to them."

Remus snorted snidely. "Some great friends you've got there."

"What makes you think that?" Regulus sounded mocking. "You mean because Evan attacked our enemy? Like it's our fucking mission?"

Remus angrily crossed his arms. "Maybe next time he won't attack my main source of information. Without him, I might as well let the mission go completely."

"It doesn't speak well for your qualities when your entire espionage construct is built on one person."

Remus leaned forward, a hopefully unmistakable look on his face. "Sirius is mine. No one touches him but me, understand?"

Regulus let out an unusually shrill laugh. "Do you realise how you sound right now?"

"I don't give a shit." Remus's patience was wearing thin. "I can't carry out my mission without him, so he must remain intact until the end."

"Wow, what happened to the ever uncaring Remus? Where's all your 'fun' gone? Is your little headache giving you a hard time using your fucking brain?"

Remus wanted to punch Regulus. "The only things the headache has given me are anger and hatred. And I don't think those make me any less capable of fulfilling my mission."

The grin disappeared from Regulus's face. Surprisingly serious, he leaned forward.

"Be honest. Have you had an outburst like that before?"

Remus averted his eyes, shrugged. "That was the third of the kind...I think."

"And did the other two also end in someone having to go to hospital?"

Remus shook his head. "They were a little... different."

"In what way? Different emotions? Different valves?"

Remus didn't want to talk about it, about these weak moments. Not with Regulus, who only gloated over such things, after all.

"I have no idea... The first time it ended in a stupid argument, the second time..." He hesitated.

Regulus didn't seem to need more information, fortunately. He leaned back in his chair again, one eyebrow raised. "Wow. Your coping strategies sound very healthy."

"Are you my fucking therapist or something?"

"If you need one?"

"Shut up."

"No, but let's be clear." Regulus put his hands flat on the arm of the chair. "Anger or no anger. You can't pull something like that just now. Not only does it jeopardise your position with the Dark Lord, but it risks exposing your identity. Every extra person who knows is a security risk."

"I got it the first time," Remus grumbled.

"With your hotheadedness, I'd rather say it twice." Regulus seemed unfazed. "And most importantly, if you have another one of those... let's call it 'fits', come to me immediately. I can help you come down, and then you won't have to use the next poor sod for it."

"Are you sure you're not giving yourself a bit too much credit there?"

Regulus smiled, confident. "I can handle you, don't worry."

Later, Regulus walked Remus back to the front door. Remus noticed his unusually springy steps as he did so. Why was the idiot in such a good mood?

"Well, I was able to convince Evan to not tell anyone. You owe me for this, I hope you realize that."

"Fine," Remus grumbled, relentless weariness now catching up with him after the faded anger.

"Wow, your mood is fantastic." Regulus held the door open for him. "Next time, I want you to apologise to Kreacher, you were quite out of line with him earlier."

Remus just rolled his eyes. "My regards to your friend Evan. Hope both his eyes swell up nicely."

"Lovely."

Remus didn't even wait for Regulus to close the door again before disappearing.

Despite his fatigue setting in, Remus still remembered to pack Sirius' toiletry bag at home and take him back to St. Mungos along with some clothes. He didn't quite hit the room when he was apparating this time and had to pass a few irritated nurses before he could push his way into Sirius's room. Hopefully no one would get the idea to follow him and ask stupid questions.

Sirius lay where Remus had left him, slumbering peacefully. By now it was obvious that the doctors had done their job, because his swelling had already gone down considerably and his face had already regained an almost natural shape. The cut was also healing well, but it was likely that he would be left with a scar from it.

Remus pulled a chair up to the bed and settled down. His whole body ached, he couldn't even tell what was coming from where. He looked at his hands, still trembling slightly from the exertion, knuckles full of blood, mostly Evan's but also his own. He still hadn't washed it off, still felt too much like a trophy.

He knew he eventually had to reflect what he had just done. How unnecessarily reckless, how irrational he had been. But he just couldn't bother right now.

Carefully, he leaned forward, reached out and brushed a curl from Sirius's face with shaky fingers. He looked peaceful, pain-free. That was what mattere...

As if poked, he jerked his hand back and looked at it in horror.

What the fuck was he doing?

Probably fatigue, he tried to calm himself. *It turns everyone into idiots.*

If he got some sleep, then the clarity would come back.

He tried to get comfortable on the chair, but it was so small and hard that it seemed impossible. Instead, much like Sirius had done when they first met in the hospital, he had to lie down with his upper body on Sirius's bed and rest his head on his arms. It still wasn't comfortable, and from the outside he probably looked like a mourner at his lovers deathbed, but it at least let him fall into a restless slumber after a few minutes.

Loud.

Music. Familiar.

A few lines, favourite song.

A feeling.

Right?

A laugh, a look. Black hair.

Everything else fades.

Nothing else matters.

All it takes is a sign of weakness

A tremor of the fingers

I need cool blood

For it does me no good

To remember you

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Meine Soldaten/My Soldiers' by Maxim (Very important song for me! One of the songs that inspired me to write the fic, actually. And also very central to Remus and his development in Act 2. ;))

I did it! I'm trying to be fast with the next one :))

Hope you liked it.

See ya!

Chapter 24: In Doubt For The Doubt

Chapter Summary

My life becomes disruption
My existence scandal

Chapter Notes

CW Use of Drugs, Mentions of Torture, Mental Distress, Panic Attack

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In doubt for the doubt

The hesitation and the anger

In doubt for tearing

One‘s own uniform

Regulus was quite proud of himself. Even though he had expected an effect on Remus, he had never thought it would be so fast and so fierce. That he would come here, in the middle of the night, to break Evan's nose just because he had punched Sirius. Regulus would never have expected this in his wildest dreams.

It didn't stop him from upping the dose even more, though, simply because he could. If the potion was able to boost his impulsiveness, it might do even more, produce something concrete, like memories or even real, tangible feelings. Perhaps the knot just needed to break and then Remus would regain a piece of himself.

He was in a good mood the morning Remus picked up the first batch of his stronger dose. He'd been in Grimmauld Place for nearly two weeks, had completed half a dozen missions in the meantime, and had certainly killed at least as many people. Regulus never asked specifics, the small scraps he learned through Barty and Evan were more than

enough.

Remus looked rested, understandably so. No potion for two weeks had made all disturbing impulses sink down deep again. The new batch would surely hit like a grenade. Regulus was looking forward to it.

"When are you heading back?" asked Regulus, good-humored.

Remus hesitated with his answer, but at least no longer looked at him like he was insane when he tried small talk.

"Day after tomorrow. Tonight's another big one, then it's done."

Regulus had heard about it, some smuggling, along with Karkaroff. He didn't ask further.

"That sounds good. You must be sorely missed back home by now."

Remus grimaced. "I don't even want to think about it."

Regulus tried hard to put a friendly expression on his face. "And you know what to do. If anything happens again, come to me. Before you do anything stupid again."

"Will do," Remus grumbled and made to leave.

"Oh, er, I'll have to reschedule my next pickup. I'm at a wedding that day."

Regulus shrugged. "Sure, I'll get it ready the day before." And then, a little hesitantly, he followed up, "Who's getting married?"

"Two of Remus's close friends. James Potter and Lily Evans. You might have heard the names before."

"Yes," Regulus said neutrally, numbly. "Once or twice."

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In doubt for the bitterness

And my hot tears

Regulus wished he could say he was taking this news well. That he didn't stagger into his workroom fifteen minutes later, didn't reach into the top shelf with shaky fingers and emptied one of his strongest tranquilliser potions in one go. Didn't cower into the nearest corner afterwards, legs pulled to his chest, face pressed to his knees.

Regulus would like to be stronger than that. Over a year after he had put an end to this sad charade, he would like to be someone who was honestly celebrating James's new found happiness. But he wasn't like that. Instead he was consumed by anger, sadness, jealousy. It took his breath away.

The potion saved him from a full-blown breakdown, but it didn't put an end to his trail of thoughts. Regulus wanted to get up, to break everything around him, he wanted to scream, to cry, to rage.

He wanted to see him so badly.

Hug him one more time, kiss him, hear him whisper in his ear that everything was going to be all right. Just one more time.

Just one more time.

***

Regulus didn't crawl out of his corner until late in the evening. Not until he could be sure that, with the exception of Kreacher, he was home alone and no one could see how out of it he was. He couldn't stand anyone now. All he wanted was to fall asleep on the last surges of the drug. And not to have to think any more.

But not even that was granted to him. As he crept up the first flight of stairs on silent soles, already feeling safe, there was a knock at the front door.

Why couldn't people arrive here at a reasonable hour? This house was degenerating more and more into a shitty hotel.

Before he could open the door himself, Kreacher came rushing out of the kitchen.

"Oh there Master Regulus is. Kreacher has prepared dinner."

Regulus, his mind still slowed, didn't even address Kreacher's question, just stared at the door.

Kreacher, confused by his apathy, finally opened it a little, peered out, and then bowed.

"Oh, Master Crouch, what can I do for you?"

Regulus didn't even wait for the voice to answer, he rushed to it and yanked the front door all the way open. There stood Barty, nothing on him but the clothes he wore. He had a black eye. He was crying.

All at once his anger had ebbed away, together with some of the numbness. Hastily he bent down to Kreacher and murmured, "Could you put on some tea? Something soothing."

"Of course Master Regulus," Kreacher said eagerly and strode unhurriedly away.

Regulus straightened up again and looked sympathetically at Barty. "Is it time?"

Barty only nodded, his shoulders drooping, his eyes looking even more tired than usual.

Regulus stepped aside and let him enter. Closed the door behind him, gave him another look. He looked so pitiful that Regulus gave him a quick hug, though he usually was not a fan of physical contact.

"I really tried," Barty immediately began frantically, wiping away the tears. "I really..."

Regulus motioned him to stay calm. "Come on, let's go to the living room. You can tell me everything in a minute."

"Is anyone else here?" asked Barty cautiously.

"No, don't worry. I'm on my own. No one will see you."

Barty followed him into the living room, sat down in his usual spot. Only instead of sprawling and hanging both arms casually over the backrest, he sat slumped, as if he wanted to stain the couch as little as

possible.

Regulus sat down next to him, a little closer than usual, hoping that would comfort Barty at least a little.

They waited until Kreacher had served them tea and left the living room again before Regulus finally started, "Now tell me. Is your mother ...?"

"She's gone." Barty moistened his chapped lips. "Father talked her into it. In the end she wouldn't even look at me." He stared at his lap.

"She's at St. Mungo's?"

Barty nodded and took the cup and saucer onto his lap. "They have a separate ward there for 'her kind of people', as my father calls it. But she doesn't belong there."

"For how long?"

"She won't be coming home again," he took a sip. "I know it."

Regulus let his gaze wander over Barty's bruised eye. It was not swollen, but the colour was dark and intense, a testimony to his father's depravity. It was only in the light of the fireplace that he realised he also had welts on his neck.

"What happened there?" Tensely, Regulus pointed to the spots in question.

Barty shrugged his shoulders. "It's all right. I treated it. Wasn't the first time either."

Regulus shook his head in disbelief. "You should have come much sooner. Your father is dangerous."

Barty looked at him sceptically. "You mean here, where everything is so much better?"

"No one's going to hurt you here." Regulus returned the look firmly. "I'll make sure of that."

"Don't say it like that," Barty took another sip and put the cup back on the table. "It makes me sound like a helpless pushover."

"It was not meant to sound like that." Regulus looked into the fireplace. "I'm sorry about all this."

"Don't be." Barty kneaded his fingers.

As they lapsed into silence, Regulus noticed Barty's fingers digging into the fabric of his trousers.

"Are you in pain?" he asked carefully.

"It's bearable."

"If you want, I'll give you something for it. Something to help you get a little... down, too."

Regulus wasn't actually very generous with his potions, especially since he also knew about their possible side effects. But today was a shitty day anyway, for both of them. One could make an exception.

"If you have something... that would be great."

"Come along." Regulus didn't want to leave him alone, so he made sure Barty accompanied him. It was pathetic that after vegetating here all day, he was back barely half an hour later. And was toying with the idea of having another one of the potions as well.

"Here," he said, tossing him the vial. "It'll calm you down. You feel a bit muddy in the head, though. Thinking gets hard."

"Just what I need," Barty said, and like Regulus before, emptied the vial in one go.

Regulus looked longingly at the remaining vial on the shelf. The anxiety inside him was already returning, and Regulus knew that a miserable night would be ahead of him if....

Without giving it much thought, he grabbed the potion and drank. Things would be different tomorrow, but today he couldn't face reality in its full force.

Barty looked at him with wide eyes. "What was that for?"

Regulus just waved it off. "Oh, don't worry about it. You're more important now."

"Bullshit," Barty said. "What's going on?"

Regulus shook his head, increasingly annoyed. "It's all right. I'll be fine."

"Wow, so you want me to spill my most intimate secrets to you and you keep playing the tragic secret keeper?"

The anger returned. "Oh, shut up. God forbid, I have issues I don't want to talk about sometimes."

"You never talk to me. Ever." Bartys gaze bore into him, frustrated. "At least not about things that matter. Sometimes I feel like I don't even know you."

Regulus felt the accusing look getting to him. Lowering his eyes, he walked past Barty out of the workroom. Without looking up, he muttered. "Come, I'll show you where you can sleep."

Barty followed him, silently. His heavy footsteps echoed off the walls. He was right, after all. Regulus had never told him much about himself. Especially not since he'd met James. Everything had changed since then.

Regulus pushed open the door to one of the guest rooms and waited impatiently for Barty to catch up. The potion slowly took effect, he felt pleasantly light.

"If you need anything else, you can ask Kreacher, he'll take care of it," Regulus said as Barty looked around the room. It wasn't very big, but in comparison to the rest of the house it was quite comfortably furnished.

"Is there anything else?", Regulus added, a little impatiently. He wanted to get to bed as soon as possible. Before everything started spinning again.

"I'm ... sorry," said Barty, whose tongue also seemed to grow heavy. "I must seem really ungrateful sometimes."

"Stop it." Regulus closed his eyes.

"I understand if you can't tell me things. I'm sure you're ... not having an easy time either."

"Barty, it's okay. I'm not mad. Let it go."

He took a step towards Regulus, eyes glazed, lips pressed together.

"We have to stick together... I think we have more in common than we think."

Regulus sighed in surrender. "What do you mean?" It was obvious Barty wasn't ready to let him go. Even the potion didn't seem to take that away from him.

"We're both..." He caught Regulus's gaze and didn't speak further. Regulus, suddenly, felt a lump growing in his throat.

Lost.

The word came before Regulus could stop it. Quickly followed by others, ones that weighed even heavier.

Lonely. Abandoned. Forgotten.

These were his real best friends. The only ones he really had left. He had chosen them. And decided against what he had actually wanted. And now the one he loved was marrying someone else and Regulus was sitting in the corner, strung out.

Alone.

It was that fucking potion. A few theatrical words were enough to make him feel sorry for himself.

He was alone.

A dry sob hung in his throat, wanting to get out. But Regulus would not allow it, would not allow tears either. Not if anyone could see him.

Barty was suddenly there, hugging him, without asking. He hated that. But he didn't fight it, just put his heavy head down and tried to think something coherent, which kept him from bursting into tears right away.

"I'm sorry," Barty whispered again, sounding like he was on the verge of a breakdown himself. They were an explosive mixture, both too hazy, impulsive and unstable. They could explode at any moment.

Regulus wanted to get away, suddenly. Get some distance. Felt trapped in his foggy head and in the tight embrace. But Barty would not let him go.

"I...I have to-" he whispered, lifting his head, trying to put distance between them. "Barty," he gasped. Then Barty let go, but only a little. Let just a little air between them so that he could catch Regulus's gaze.

Tears, wounds, despair. It was too much.

They exploded.

Regulus couldn't tell exactly what was happening. His head refused to work, sending only fragments to his wax-dipped mind. He felt a hard wall at his back, felt a body pressing against him. Warmth, heat, fire. Soft lips. It was unreal.

Regulus let himself be carried away, couldn't help it. This was what he wanted, wasn't it? The sweet nothingness. No regrets, no thoughts, just sinking. Into the arms of someone who was just as lost as he was. How wrong that was, what it meant, what it destroyed, it didn't matter at that moment. He was whole again.

Barty tore away from him at some point, completely distraught. "I'm sorry," he gasped, "This... I don't know what got int..."

Regulus didn't allow the words, couldn't allow them. He grasped Barty's neck, pulled him close again, kissed him eagerly. When Barty tried to break away again, Regulus clasped his face with both hands, leaning his forehead against his, feeling the warm breath on his skin. "Don't say anything. Don't say anything now."

Barty just nodded, his cheeks flushed, his eyes misty. He looked exactly how Regulus felt. How Regulus never wanted to stop feeling.

"Please," he continued to breathe, so softly it could barely be heard. "Touch me."

Make me feel like I'm not alone. Like I'm not completely lost yet.

And he did.

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For the inner contrition

When you show your teeth

Regulus stared into his black tea. It was still too hot to drink, a painful temptation. He waited patiently, not looking up, instead following the small streaks that rippled on the surface. He was satisfied with that. Just that. Nothing more. Under no circumstances more.

Kreacher brought him breakfast to the dining table.

"Kreacher apologises for being late. Master Regulus usually tends to get up much later."

"No problem, you couldn't have known."

He was presented with an omelette, gold brown, with ham and cheese. Unusual. Very rich. Just what he needed right now.

"Thank you Kreacher."

"Does Master Regulus need anything else? Does he know when Master Crouch plans to get up?"

Regulus's fingers tightened around the cup. "No, I don't know."

"Well, if Master Regulus needs anything else, he can call for Kreacher anytime."

"Thank you." On impulse, Regulus took a sip of tea and, as expected, burned his lips. He never learned. Never. Not a thing.

He had gotten himself into the biggest mess of all time. If he thought about it too long, he'd end up pouring the tea over his head. He was so stupid. He was the biggest idiot in the whole fucking world.

"Oh, up so early, little cousin?", he heard the voice of the person he wanted to see second least right now only to Barty.

"What are you doing here so early?" asked Regulus annoyed, not looking up from his food as Bellatrix sauntered up to the table.

"It's your big day, Regulus," she purred, "Hasn't your mother told you about it yet?"

"No?" said Regulus, irritated. He hadn't spoken to his mother in days. He avoided her wherever he could.

"We had a really great idea." Bellatrix propped her hands on the table, full of drive. "We want to finally make sure you master the Cruciatus Curse."

"Excuse me?" Regulus nearly dropped his fork.

"It broke your mothers heart that you failed so miserably at torturing that werewolf." She took her hands off the table again and gestured wildly with them. "So we've decided to organise some tutoring."

Regulus instantly lost his appetite.

"We've picked out some easy victims for you to work on. All at your own pace. Until you've mastered it. And until your mother is satisfied."

"You are insane." Regulus shook his head. "Why the fuck would I do that?"

"Why not? You don't even have to bother with the victims, Rodolphus brought them this morning. All just for you. So stop whining about it."

"I'm not whining," Regulus hissed. He couldn't do that, not today. He could barely look his mother in the eye as it was, how could he when he was hungover and consumed with guilt? It would finish him off.

"You don't have a choice, Reggie. We'll start in an hour, I'm glad I didn't have to wake you at least."

Regulus almost threw up when he thought of what would have happened if he hadn't woken up before her visit. If she had gone looking for him in his room and he hadn't been there. But instead at...

Regulus was the biggest idiot in the whole world.

"Fine," he grumbled unwillingly, because he knew he had no choice anyway. When had he ever stood a chance against his fucking family?

"Wonderful, I'll see you downstairs then." And with that she was already strutting away, leaving Regulus in peace. A few more sentences and he would have flung the omelette at her.

***

The worst thing was: his mother was right. Torture could be learned. Regulus resisted tooth and nail from the moment he entered the cellar. Only launched half-hearted, ineffective attempts against the poor,

bound captives. But if someone was worked on long enough, harassed, put down, then the hatred would eventually come of its own accord. Then it didn't even have to be directed at the person in front of him. Then the black, seething, undefined feeling in the chest was enough, the inner hellfire that had the own soul as fuel. And the curse worked.

It wasn't supposed to be as bad for Regulus as his first murder. But after the disastrous last day, his raw nerves and the torment his mother caused him in that cellar, it was just too much.

At some point he broke out, leaving the cellar and the screams behind him, ran upstairs, faster than any spell could follow him. Upstairs, at the foot of the stairs, he almost bumped into Barty, who flinched back in irritation.

"Reg?"

"Not now," Regulus hissed, too distraught to feel embarrassment or guilt at the sight of him. He just hated him, hated everything, himself most of all.

"Is everything alright?" Barty asked as Regulus stomped breathlessly down the corridor towards his room. "I don't want..."

"NOT NOW!" shouted Regulus at the top of his lungs, not even giving him a glance.

If Barty said anything else in reply, he didn't hear it.

Finally in his room, he slammed the door, charmed it so no one could get in, and gave himself over to his seething panic attack. This time there was no one to ease it, or to talk him out of it. He was alone.

His life was nothing more than that. Full of moments when the walls were closing in on him. Full of moments when he did unspeakable things. Full of friendships and people he ruined because he was selfish. A never-ending circle.

His gaze fell to the foot of his bed. Half-covered, riskily and carelessly left behind, he recognised the Horcrux book. Voldemort's secret. The man who was the cause of all his problems, the reason for his ruined life. It became the channel for his anger. Without thinking, he grabbed

it and threw it against the nearest wall. Some of the pages detached from the impact, sailing rustling to the floor. Regulus watched them go, his face contorted in pain.

Someone had to stop him.

Maybe all this was his finger pointing. Maybe it had to be him. Maybe he had to be the one to take Voldemort down.

He had nothing left to lose anyway.

In doubt for collapsing

In front of the whole room

My life becomes disruption

My existence scandal

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Im Zweifel für den Zweifel' (In Doubt For The Doubt) by Tocotronic (I don't even know if the lyrics make any sense in English. I really hope so, I like them a lot. When in doubt, always rule for the doubt.)

My weekend is packed, so I won't be able to upload another chapter this week. Aiming towards Tuesday or Wednesday for the next :))

Hope you liked it!

See ya! <3

Chapter 25: Crystal Lion

Chapter Notes

CW Problematic Drinking Behavior, Mental Distress, Depression

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I've been running in and out of so many dreams

I've been cutting myself into pieces over

this way you feel

this love I need

When Remus returned from his mission, he was already greeted at the front door by Sirius's Gibson. It didn't actually sound bad. Someone had been practising.

The pleasant surprise was replaced by a less pleasant one when he entered the flat and realised what it looked like. Empty pizza boxes, piles of crumpled shirts and trousers, beer bottles. An absolute mess.

Remus put down his travel bag and walked through the living room. There was an open bottle of firewhiskey on the coffee table. It was almost empty.

"Sirius?" he called, but was almost certain Sirius couldn't hear him through the noise of his guitar. He was playing one of those catchy riffs Remus had heard him hum frequently over the past few weeks. He didn't remember which song it belonged to, though.

He was dreading to go upstairs. He was two days late, he knew that. He hadn't sent Sirius a message, after all, he couldn't have explained it. You couldn't send messages in the middle of a pack in some dense forest.

Should he have done it anyway?

Cautiously, he stepped up the stairs, in the noise shadow of the guitar. Knocked on the door of the bedroom, but barely heard it himself.

Pressed the handle down.

Sirius was in his tunnel, eyes closed, fingers twisted in a complicated accord. Remus stopped in the doorway, the doorhandle still in his hand, and watched Sirius finish the song. He didn't look as bad as Remus had feared, but he didn't look good either. His newfound light tan didn't hide the greyish protruding circles under his eyes. The visibly tense jaw muscles also showed his inner turmoil. He swayed slightly.

When the last note died away and Sirius loosened his grip, letting silence return with his eyes still closed, Remus applauded, putting on the warmest smile possible. At the very first meeting of his hands, Sirius jerked his eyes open in shock and glared at Remus.

"You're getting really good," Remus smiled, pointing at the Gibson. "Maybe you'll end up becoming the next Jimi Hendrix after all."

Sirius didn't reply, just strangely averted his eyes, unplugged the guitar and gently put it back in its case. Only then he looked at him again, took a hesitant step to the side to give himself stability. He was drunk.

"Is it really you?"

Remus laughed uncertainly. "Of course. Who else would it be?"

Sirius just shrugged. When he continued to make no move to approach, Remus took over. Walked up to him, spreading his arms. "You prat!" he quipped, but was secretly afraid Sirius would back away. He was relieved that he didn't.

"How are you?" asked Remus, not knowing what else to say. As soon as he had him in his arms, the smell of whiskey hit his nose.

Sirius returned the hug, hesitantly, tentatively. But then, his grip tightened, and he took a shaky breath.

"Moony..." He sounded shattered. Remus felt transported back to his return after Marlene's death. Carefully, he released the hug.

"Has something happened?" he asked, earning another shrug from Sirius.

"Been a bad few days," he murmured, his gaze lowered. "For the Order. Roberts and Edgar are dead... Moody is in hospital and will

probably lose his leg. Peter had a nervous breakdown after his last fight. He won't talk to anyone." Sirius swallowed. "And yesterday would have been Marlene's birthday." His voice sounded shaky at the end.

Remus stroked his arm. "I know, love. I'm sorry I wasn't there." He tried to look saddened. Sirius, in return, looked so lost that he hugged him again.

"It's going to be alright. I'm here now."

"For how long this time?"

Remus stared at the wall behind Sirius. "The next full moon I'll stay here, I promise. After the wedding we can do everything you want."

Sirius broke away from him, surprised. "For real now?"

Remus nodded, even though he hadn't cleared any of this with Voldemort or Dumbledore yet. "Really. We need some time to ourselves now."

Sirius smiled warmly at that, starting to stroke Remus's face. Remus could feel how much these words relieved him. He didn't know if it was wise to address the elephant in the room now.

"Sirius," he whispered after Sirius had finished his caresses. "You've been drinking, haven't you?"

He waved it off. "Just a little bit. Not too bad."

"It's not even noon yet."

"So what?" Sirius's tone grew sharper. "It's no big deal."

Remus sighed, trying his gentlest tone. "Yes it is. Have you seen what it looks like downstairs?"

"Bit of a mess, but who gives a shit. I had other problems, if you were listening to me a second ago."

"Yeah, I did." Remus put a hand against Sirius's face. He leaned into the touch, closing his eyes for a moment in exhaustion. "And I understand that too."

"Well then, let's stop talking about it."

Remus wasn't finished yet. "I just don't want this to become the norm. Drinking won't make it better, believe me. That never works."

As if a switch had been pulled, Sirius was smiling almost dreamily now, not letting on if he had understood what Remus was saying. "I really missed you, you know. You can't imagine how much."

"Yes, I can. I missed you like crazy, too. But you shouldn't drown your-" Sirius interrupted him with a kiss. Placed both hands on the back of his neck, making it all the more difficult for him to pull away.

"Sir-ius," he brought out with difficulty.

"Shhh," Sirius went, and Remus smelled a new gush of alcohol. "Enough with all that. Shouldn't we celebrate that you're back?"

Was Sirius just using his own trick on him? Remus couldn't believe it. He tried to object, but then he could already feel Sirius's hand sliding down his trousers and his words caught in his throat.

"What were you saying?", Sirius pulled Remus's face close to him. It took all of his strength to keep breathing normally as Sirius began to move his hand. It had been a long time, too long, his body craved for his touch. Sirius knew that perfectly well.

"Why don't you show me how much you've missed me," Sirius breathed, and Remus forgot about everything else.

***

It was strange. When Sirius and he were apart, they seemed to go completely different paths. While Remus blossomed, becoming Voldemort's perfect follower and the best version of himself, Sirius crashed, drank uncontrollably and became a shadow of himself. As soon as they were back together, Sirius stopped drinking and found his smile again. And Remus? Had exactly two days until the headaches started again.

And *how* they set in this time. Remus soon ran out of superlatives for it. He swallowed Regulus's pain potion, even considerably more than he was instructed to. But he wouldn't make it through otherwise.

Sirius, fortunately, did not interpret much into his long periods of silence. Remus had found that, apart from potions, his best remedy for pain was to have no prolonged interaction and little physical contact with him. It would probably make Sirius feel a little neglected over the next few days, but it was still better than picking the next fight. Or worse.

It also helped that the staff shortage in the Order was getting worse and more shifts were coming Sirius's way. So Remus had time to catch his breath and sort out his thoughts every now and then. Even if, during Sirius' absences, his thoughts sometimes tended to wander back to that one evening, when Sirius had been hurt. It was annoying.

Sirius returned from his next shifts uninjured, fortunately, though usually completely exhausted and worn out. Remus forced himself to be close to him now and then, to caress him, to kiss him. But he always felt as if he was handling a remote detonator. For the bomb inside his head.

On one of those evenings, when Sirius had already yawned so often that Remus could have sworn he was going to fall asleep at any moment, he suddenly straightened up abruptly and looked at Remus. "Oh, I forgot to ask. Will you come with me to the city centre tomorrow lunchtime?"

Remus casually scratched his temple. "Sure, where to?"

"Oh, nothing wild. Got a tattoo appointment."

***

Remus could hardly believe that only 18 hours later he was standing outside a Muggle tattoo studio with Sirius *Pureblood* Black, where he himself had made the appointment weeks ago.

"Been wanting one for a while. Goes with my new 'rock star' image, doesn't it?" winked Sirius in surprising good humour and strolled through the front door, with Remus following him.

"Welcome," a young man called over from the other end of the studio as they entered. He wore a sleeveless shirt that revealed completely tattooed arms. He didn't appear to be a punk, but he came pretty close

to the look, with the piercings and dyed, gelled-up hair.

"One of you is Sirius Black, right?" the man asked as he faced them. "I'm Alex."

Sirius raised his hand. "I am, yes."

"Cool, cool. Is that a stage name or something?"

Sirius chuckled. "Nah." He pointed at Remus. "This is Remus. Emotional support and all."

"Remus?" Alex shook his head with a smile. "Wow, I wish my mother had been this creative." He glanced searchingly to the back, where a young woman was just emerging from behind a privacy screen, pulling out her purse.

"Give me a moment, I'll be right with you. Sit down for now." He gestured to a small waiting area consisting of three chairs and a low table with several folders on it. "You can go ahead and pick out some designs if you're interested."

Sirius declined with a grin. "No thanks. I already know what I want."

Remus had to admit that he found it a bit cliché at first. But when Sirius left the studio with him two hours later, the Canis Major on the inside of his right forearm, he was beaming so much that Remus couldn't help but find it... alright.

By the evening, Sirius was still psyched about it. He was sad that the tattoo was still taped up and he couldn't show it to James yet, but that didn't stop him from talking about it incessantly.

"It didn't hurt at all like I thought it would," he repeated for the fourth time. "And went really fast, too. I think I'll get my next one in a couple of weeks."

"Do what you gotta do," Remus merely commented in response, holding a cool water bottle to his head.

"Do you have a headache?" asked Sirius finally.

"No, no, I'm just a bit warm," Remus waved it off. The less Sirius knew, the better.

"I see. Supposed to storm later, I'm sure it'll be cooler then."

"Hopefully."

Sirius cooked dinner for them, actually tried really hard this time. Prepared dessert, served wine, put on music, the whole works. Remus pretended he could even enjoy any of it. His fucking head was killing him. Maybe he shouldn't have gone with Sirius after all.

"I've noticed we've been listening to far too little music lately," Sirius said as he put on a record. "I miss it a bit."

"Yeah, you're right," Remus agreed. He listened to the first few notes of the song. Was some rock song, a man singing it. It sounded alright. When he saw Sirius looking at him meaningfully, he smiled hesitantly and gave a thumbs up. "Good choice."

"I know" Sirius grinned and took a swinging seat at the dining room table.

They didn't talk too much during the meal, mostly listening to the music. Remus felt an ominous unease growing in his chest as time went on, in addition to the familiar twinge behind his eyes. He didn't know where it came from, whether he couldn't stomach the food, or Sirius's fond gaze. But by the end of his pasta, that unease had developed into full-blown nausea.

Just as he was about to excuse himself to the toilet, he heard the guitar riff. It resounded from the record player, settled behind his eardrums, triggered something there.

"20th Century Boy," Remus muttered mechanically, as if out of his mind. He felt dizzy.

"Yep," Sirius grinned. "Always makes me think of our last night at Hogwarts. That was so great."

For a moment, Remus saw everything doubled. For a second, the Sirius sitting in front of him shared space with another Sirius. A drunken, sweaty version, dancing wildly and yelling the lyrics, beaming at him. Then he was gone again. And Remus shot up from his chair.

"All good?" asked Sirius with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah, yeah sure," Remus said, trying not to look like he was about to fall over. "I'm just going to... have a quick smoke."

"Oh okay, already?" Sirius looked disappointedly at Remus' half-full plate.

"...Sorry." Remus couldn't muster any more explanation, no way. He had to get out, he had to get away, he had to....

He had to get to Regulus immediately.

***

Remus knew that Regulus was there, somewhere, standing over him, pouring him a potion. But he couldn't see him properly because a thousand layers seemed to be laid on top of each other. They made no sense, completely out of context, familiar and unfamiliar faces saying jumbled things that made Remus feel like his head might explode at any moment. Only one thought managed to creep into his head alongside all that:

I have to get back to Sirius. He'll worry again if I don't.

But Regulus couldn't hear that thought. He poured him another potion, a sickeningly acidic mixture that made Remus feel like cauterising his throat.

"Sleep," he whispered. "It'll make you feel better."

And Remus's eyes fell shut.

"Have you all had it now? I'm freezing my arse off here!"

"Sorry, Dorcas!"

"And Sirius, put those middle fingers away."

"Hey, we're all trying to look like* Marauders *in this photo!"

"I want you to look house-trained, first and foremost. I know that's hard enough for you."

"Shut up!"

"Pads, it's freezing, get a grip."

"I'm sorry, my dearest Moony darling."

"Well, that looks wonderful. I'll count down from three. Three, two, one, smile!"

Remus felt like he had the most violent hangover of his life when he woke up. He was lying in his bed in Grimmauld Place, Regulus beside him, sitting in a chair reading a book.

"Ugh," Remus made, catching Regulus's attention.

Smiling, he flipped the book closed and set it aside. "Back among the living?"

"No," Remus muttered. What he would give to be able to dip his brain in ice water.

"What happened? You were completely out of it, I didn't even know what was going on."

"I don't know," Remus muttered and sat up. He glanced out of the window. It was dark. "How long have I been here?"

"Not long. Three hours or so. Just gave you a weak sleeping potion as a little reboot."

"Fuck." Remus clutched his head. How was he going to explain this to Sirius? He was surely dying of worry. But he also couldn't have risked being seen like that. No way.

"You can go right back. Just tell me what happened. Then I can prepare better for next time."

Remus looked at Regulus appraisingly. He looked thin, haggard. And somehow... old.

"I had dinner with Sirius. Had that headache again, like all the time when I'm home. Then I heard one of my... favourite songs, I think. Even remembered its name. And it triggered something. I started having hallucinations, really bad ones. I felt like I was going insane."

Regulus looked at him silently.

"I think I remembered a few things."

Regulus nodded, biting his lower lip. "Sounds almost like it. But it doesn't have to be a bad thing for now, does it? You said a few weeks ago that it would be helpful for you."

Remus shook his head. "Not like that. It's not like I see details or anything. And if it's such an ordeal every time, then I'll gladly do without."

"Who knows, maybe it'll get better with time," Regulus mused. "Maybe you'll just have to get used to it first."

"If only I knew why it started all at once."

"Could be anything. You're Voldemort's first attempt at *restructuring*. Things like that happen. But you don't have to worry, you'll be fine. And I'll help you as much as I can."

"Thank you," Remus murmured. He'd never thought he would ever say that to that cocky prat. But he had no one else who understood him. And in moments like these, he'd take anything he could get.

"You're welcome." He rose from a chair. "Do you need help getting up?"

Remus shook his head and swung his legs out of bed. "No, I can manage. But do you have any more of that pain potion for me?"

Regulus snorted in amusement. "Yeah, finished it earlier."

***

His return was as bad as expected. He had thought of a thousand excuses, from an urgent message from Dumbledore to a fit of self-pity and much needed fresh air. It all seemed to fizzle out when he

returned to the flat and heard the all-encompassing silence. He found the dining room table unchanged, with his last sips of wine in his glass and the half-empty pasta on his plate. He looked around the entire downstairs, but no sign of Sirius. Was he even here? He hurried up the stairs, into the bedroom. It was dark.

"Sirius?" he asked into the darkness. Turned on the light. Breathed the tension off his shoulders when he saw Sirius was there. Lying in bed, fully dressed on the duvet, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Sirius," he said again, earning a quick glance. Nothing else.

"I'm so sorry. Dumbledore made me..."

"It's all right," Sirius said soberly, not even letting him finish. He didn't sound like himself.

Remus walked around the bed, to Sirius's side and sat on the edge. Tentatively took Sirius's hand, which lay motionless at his side. Sirius had returned to staring at the ceiling. He did not return the gesture. Remus felt unease rising within him.

"No. I'm sure you were very worried. I should know better. Especially with all the attacks going on."

Sirius blinked several times. Pulled his hand out of Remus's grip and crossed his arms behind his head.

Remus didn't know what to say. A strange pressure settled on his chest. The urge to touch Sirius, to apologise again. Bewildered, he resisted it.

"Do you want to be alone?" he asked cautiously.

Sirius snorted bitterly. "No. I don't."

Remus bit his lower lip. "Then can I lie down with you?"

Sirius hesitated, his gaze fixed further on the ceiling as if it held the secret recipe to Voldemort's destruction.

"Okay."

Remus nodded in relief and rose. Went to his side of the bed, where he wouldn't be too close to Sirius, and lay down beside him. Sirius touched the wall above the headboard, found the light switch and turned out the light. Darkness settled on them like a veil.

"I was able to clear it with Dumbledore," Remus lied, unable to bear the silence. "I gave him a full report and agreed that I'd take a break next full moon."

Sirius didn't reply, however Remus felt him stir beside him.

"I'm sorry I ruined the evening, you put so much effort into it and I'm just..."

"Don't," Sirius said sternly. "I told you it was fine. I'm sure you had your reasons, as usual."

It sounded so bitter that Remus thought he could taste it on his tongue. There was no way he could allow himself to do something like that again. It would ruin their relationship if he did.

It would ruin Sirius.

"I don't know how to make it up to you," he said, apologetically. "I do so much shit, you don't deserve this."

Rustling next to Remus again. He waited, eager for an answer, for anything. Then he felt Sirius shift close to him, a touch just a matter of inches. Remus was unsure how to interpret that.

"Can I touch you?" asked Remus, for the first time.

"Okay," Sirius repeated and Remus wrapped his arms around him, pressing himself against Sirius so tightly that normally he would have complained about it. But now he said nothing, letting it wash over him, not returning it.

"Sometimes I think you're just a dream," Sirius whispered softly over Remus's shoulders. "That I'm actually all alone and imagining everything. And that one day I'll wake up. That one day you won't come back."

"Don't say that." Remus didn't loosen the hug. It felt like pressing against cold stone. "I'll always come back."

"No," Sirius whispered, not an ounce of doubt in his voice. "You won't."

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Crystal Lion' by Native Young

So it turned out, in fact, that my weekend wasn't packed at all! Instead I caught the flu and couldn't get out of my bed for three days :'). Feeling slightly better now, though! Please excuse any typos etc... Couldn't look at my screen any longer.

See ya! <3

Chapter 26: To Lose My Life

Chapter Notes

CW Drinking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He said to lose my life or lose my love

That's the nightmare I've been running from

So let me hold you in my arms a while

I was always careless as a child

James had loved Lily since he was twelve. Even then he knew it was love, though everyone else had laughed at him. He had rarely been so sure of anything.

She had let him dither for a long time, almost too long. He had looked for love elsewhere, but had ultimately found nothing but pain. But when he had needed her most, at one of the lowest point of his life, she had been there. Had caught him. As she always did.

Marriage was just the next logical step. It was not too soon, not too rushed. It was the right thing to do. Everything was right with her. It couldn't come soon enough.

It was something they could all look forward to. An occasion to meet all his closest friends. An occasion that wasn't a funeral. He had been to far too many funerals this year.

It was stressful, of course, because of the short notice, especially for Lily. But she wasn't complaining, quite the opposite. In the busy time in the weeks before the wedding, life came back to them both for the first time since Marlene's death. They laughed again, almost like before. They loved each other, more intimately than ever before. And sometimes that was even enough to make him fall asleep peacefully in the evening. Sometimes, for a few blissful moments, nothing inside him screamed for Regulus Black anymore.

While it only made the other moments all the more painful and guilt-ridden, maybe that was also the first step to healing.

***

The night before the wedding, James did not sleep. He was far too agitated, and far too many thoughts ran through his head. He dragged them into the morning until the alarm chased them away with shrill sounds. As if pulled by invisible strings, he and Lily got up and immediately began to rummage, tense, introverted. It got to the point where James, ten things on his mind at once, ran full tilt into the doorframe. It banged more than it hurt, even his glasses were unharmed. Lily flinched violently nonetheless, jolted out of her trance she held a hand in front of her mouth.

"Are you hurt?"

James, having gotten over the initial shock, smiled, and finally burst out laughing.

"No!" he laughed. "It's all good, darling."

After brief hesitation, Lily joined in the laughter. "We're pretty out of it, aren't we?"

James nodded and wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "I'll have to tell Sirius about that later. If I don't accidentally kill myself before."

"That would be great."

Thankfully, they both loosened up a bit after that. James even made it to their friends arrival unharmed. Sirius looked fantastic in his tailored suit, his hair tied back into a small bun, his flawless teeth gleaming as dazzlingly white as ever.

Moony had also dressed up unusually. His dark blond hair was neatly combed, and for the first time since James had known him, he wore a proper suit with long enough trouser legs.

Mary wore an azure dress that showed off her curves discreetly but still effectively. She had braided her black curls into an elaborate plait

and put on summery, natural-looking make-up. She looked stunning.

After James had finished gushing about how great his friends all looked, they briefly talked through what Mary and Sirius had to do during the ceremony. Shortly after, Mary and Lily were already saying their goodbyes, James giving his soon to be wife one last kiss before facing Sirius's grin and Remus's sympathetic smile.

"You look like you're about to pass out or have a nervous breakdown, one of the two."

"I'm guessing both," James admitted, rubbing the back of his head. "You should have seen me before. I was so out of it, I just walked right into the door frame."

"Oh, that's where that red mark on your forehead came from?" Sirius' characteristically loud laugh rang through the flat and James immediately joined in.

"Maybe we can organise some make-up from Mary or Lily later. Then you won't have to look like a complete idiot in your wedding pictures later."

"I don't think any make-up in the world will stop that from happening," Remus commented dryly, only making James and Sirius laugh harder.

Once James had calmed down again, he glanced at the clock. "Do you know when Peter was planning to come? He didn't let me know."

Sirius shrugged. "He hasn't talked to any of us... I didn't want to push him either, he seemed to want some distance after what happened."

"Hmm." James hoped Peter didn't feel neglected by them.

"Don't worry too much about it, Prongs. Today will certainly cheer him up. Seeing everyone together again for once, without any Order bullshit."

"I hope so."

James then slowly began to put on his suit, in the presence of Sirius, who helped him out when his hands were too shaky to fasten his buttons properly or tie his tie. As time went on, he became more and more nervous. Eventually, even Sirius's silliest quips didn't help distract him from it.

"Oh come on, Prongsie." Sirius slapped him lightly on the back at one point, presumably to loosen him up a bit. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Oh god, James could think of a thousand things. Had he got the rings? Had he let Mary know that...?

"James," Remus reprimanded him. "Don't do that. I can see you're making yourself unnecessarily crazy again."

"Sorry," he said guiltily, pulling his jacket on. Had it got wider? Did it look like shit on him now? Maybe he should have tried it on earlie....

"So, we're leaving *now*," Remus ordered, pushing James away from the mirror. "You look great. Now clean your glasses and you'll even be able to spot potentially dangerous door frames."

"Yes, Mum," James grumbled. Remus just always knew when someone needed a guiding hand.

They were silent for a moment, picking up the things they would need, making sure they didn't forget anything. James paused for a moment to watch his friends. By now, the jealous twinge in his chest when he looked at them was gone. Sirius had told him about the relationship of his own accord, had even apologised for being secretive. As it turned out, that had been all James had needed. After all, he loved them far too much to be mad at them for long.

"Thanks for being here," he said.

Sirius shook his head. "Well, sure, it goes without saying. We Marauders belong together, don't we?"

"Yes." *We do.*

***

The ceremony was wonderful, James so excited during it that he could barely remember any of it later. The only thing he could see was Lily, in her beautiful off-the-shoulder wedding dress, with her half-open, flaming red hair and the warm, tender look on her face. He couldn't believe that this woman had chosen him.

They gave their wedding vows, in the traditional Muggle way, just as Lily had wished. They exchanged rings, kissed, applauded as they stepped outside hand in hand. James kept smiling so broadly the whole time that his cheeks hurt at one point.

They had chosen his parents' large garden for the celebrations. Two large white pavilions had been set up and below the bigger of the two all the guests were seated at several large tables. It had become an astonishing number. Almost the entire Order was there, all except Dumbledore and Moody, who was still in hospital after his amputation. All the members present had in common that they looked exhausted, but they seemed in good spirits throughout. And in their fine robes, some of them traditional, you could almost forget that they were in the midst of the most brutal, dirty phase of the war.

Lily's parents had even come, along with her sister. They were staying on the sidelines, the discomfort written all over their faces, especially Petunia. Generally they were all right, the few times James had met them they had been quite friendly to him. But he couldn't really warm up to them, especially not to her sister. So he would probably leave most of the conversation with them to Lily today.

His closest friends were sitting right at the table with James. Sirius, Remus, Peter with Grace (who had thankfully turned up just before they had started), Mary, Alice and Frank. Just as James had wanted. This was his family.

After he and Lily had officially welcomed all the guests again, drinks and aperitifs were distributed. Before the first toast, Sirius and Mary gave their speeches. Mary began and she had barely started before everyone started giggling.

"I remember the first time Lily mentioned a boy called James Potter to me, back in second year. She called him an 'arrogant moron'... Back then, no one could have ever convinced me that 'moron' would someday convince her to marry him."

She continued in this spirit, but thankfully confined herself more to Lily's qualities than James's shortcomings. This grace period, however, totally came to an end when Sirius took over. He recalled his most embarrassing attempts at flirting with Lily and how he had made an absolute fool of himself each time. Sirius probably knew full well that James would do the same the other way around.

"But then again, maybe that's James's very greatest strength," Sirius

eventually concluded this wave of embarrassing anecdotes. "That he doesn't give up, that he fights for the people he cares about. He always knows what he wants, pulls everyone along with him. I think to be loved by James Potter is one the greatest things that can happen to a person."

Everyone present glanced at James, expecting emotion, a cheeky retort, a hug. For a brief moment, James felt exposed. His innermost weakness, his greatest flaw, thrust outward for everyone to see. The words sounded like satire to his ears. Like a wish, an unrealistic idea of what James should be. But he was none of those things. He didn't fight. He let people down when they needed him most.

He thanked Sirius profusely for his loving words anyway, earning a few pats on the back and more congratulations. But it took James quite a while after that before he felt like he could breathe again. After dinner, sensing the first opportunity, he stole outside for some fresh air.

Just as he thought he was safe near the driveway, behind Lily's parents' red Audi 80, he heard Frank's voice behind him.

"Quite a lot for one day, isn't it?"

Startled, James turned and tried a smile, but it probably resembled more of a grimace.

"Can be quite overwhelming, right?" continued Frank, a kindly sympathetic expression on his face. "I felt the same way. Couldn't get a bite down all day at my wedding."

James was touched by his effort. "Yeah, I'm a bit... overwhelmed right now too." Actually he hadn't been until just now, in fact he was overjoyed, euphoric. But as always, all it took was one wrong sentence, one trigger, and he was back to being the James he despised the most.

Frank joined him, leaning casually against the Audi. James hoped Lily's parents didn't see that, the car was almost a member of the family.

"But you don't have to be. Everything's going super smoothly so far, isn't it? And you make a beautiful couple, by the way."

James looked at him gratefully. "Sweet of you."

"I hope you don't let the Order and the war take away your joy. Just block it out, that's what Alice and I did. You don't have to feel guilty. We're all sacrificing way too much as it is. The next few days should just be yours."

James thought of the shift schedule, what was in store for him and Lily for the next few weeks, and had to stifle a resigned sigh. "Thank you. But I think we'll still have to postpone our honeymoon for now."

"But not for too long, I know how that usually goes," Frank grinned.

"I'll try."

After that, they digressed thematically - as they always did - towards Quidditch. In fact, it was this mundane topic that calmed him down the most, put him back on track. Perhaps Frank had suspected as much. He was a good judge of character.

They chatted until an upset Mary demanded urgently that he get his "ass" back to "*his*" wedding. Laughing, James and Frank made their way back.

His little mumbled "thank you" was only commented on by Frank with a knowing smile.

Meanwhile, in the pavilion, all the crockery had disappeared from the tables and the guests were being served alcohol and other drinks entirely as they wished. James knew that now was the part of the day he dreaded the most: the wedding dance.

James was not a good dancer. The last few weeks had made that quite clear once again. They had rehearsed all the steps well and it was actually not difficult at all, a slow waltz, child's play. For everyone else except James.

As he stepped forward with Lily, surrounded by guests who had formed a curious circle around them, he felt sick to his stomach. Lily's reassuring hands didn't help. When the first notes of *We've only just begun* by the Carpenters rang out, James thought a rope had wrapped itself around his legs.

In the end, it was not as bad as he had feared. Even if he didn't deliver the most confident performance, he didn't embarrass himself and when Mary with Sirius, Peter with Grace and a few others joined the

dance, the attention was fortunately no longer entirely on him.

Lily, who had been watching his facial expressions closely for the last few minutes, could no longer contain her amusement.

"You dork!" Fittingly, James stepped on her foot at that exact moment. It made them both burst into giggles. It took some tension off his shoulders.

"Excuse me?" He raised his eyebrows aristocratically.

"Worked out well, didn't it," Lily whispered and blew him a kiss on the lips.

"Pure luck," James sighed, somehow bringing the song to a close. He then, Lily by the hand, instantly rescued himself from the danger zone. They found themselves next to Remus, who was casually leaning back on a chair, watching the now bustling dance floor from a safe distance.

It wasn't five seconds before Sirius tapped James on the shoulder and pointed to Lily, grinning mischievously. "Can I borrow your wife for the next dance?"

He nodded with played seriousness. "If you dare."

Sirius winked and held out his arm to Lily, who immediately hooked it. "I know I can't possibly come close to you dance-wise, Prongsie. But I'll try just this once."

James stuck his tongue out at him and watched as the two returned to the dance floor. When he turned back around, his eyes fell on Remus, whose eyes were glued to Sirius, thoughtfully.

"You don't want to try your hand? Your dancing definitely can't be worse than mine, so don't worry."

Remus grimaced. "Trust me, I'm worse than that. I don't want to put anyone through that."

"Oh, I'm sure Sirius can make up for it. He's an excellent dancer."

Remus shook his head just slightly, his gaze still fixed on Sirius, who seemed to have a good time with Lily.

"I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

Remus snorted and gave James a fleeting sideways glance. "Maybe later, when people are drunk and the songs aren't super slow and romantic. Right now... that would probably not go down so well with everyone here. "

James raised his eyebrows as he understood. He felt a slight tug in his chest. "Oh, they don't matter. It's just a dance. Anyone who has a problem with that, I'll chase them out of my wedding myself."

Remus smirked, but didn't seem convinced. James grabbed Remus's shoulder, firmly and emphatically. "Don't worry about it so much, please. I want you to have a nice evening. You've never cared about anyone else's opinion anyway."

"True." Remus smiled fleetingly as Sirius waved in their direction. "But he cares."

James lowered his hand. The tugging in his chest grew stronger.

***

As time went on, the music got louder and the mood more boisterous. James forced himself to dance a few more times with Lily, which actually started to be fun when he reached the right alcohol level. He also danced with Mary, Alice and Grace, eventually forgetting how unrhythmic he was, just moving himself and his partner the way it felt right. He probably danced best in those moments.

He didn't leave the pavilion again until it was already dark, drunk and psyched from his last dance. There were hardly any people outside, but he found Remus, Peter and Mary in the smoking area, chatting casually. James joined them, hanging on to Peter and patting him on the back in a chummy manner. "I'm really so glad you came, Pete!"

Peter nodded, his cheeks flushed. James couldn't tell if it was from the alcohol or the dancing. "Sure, prongs. Can't pass that up!"

"We've missed you the last few weeks, I hope you know that!"

Peter waved it off, but James could see clearly that he was happy to

hear it. "Yeah, I know. Needed a bit of a rest. But it's all right now."

"Take all the time you need," Mary said, having once again fallen into her bad habit at parties of bumming cigarettes from Remus. "We all understand that! That was a terrible attack you witnessed."

James agreed with her. He didn't know how he would have reacted if one of those Death Eater monsters had blown half his shift partner's leg off with a curse. He'd have a breakdown too then.

Peter seemed grateful. "Lovely of you. Appreciate it."

In a fit of caring, he leaned down to Peter: "Got everything you need? Enough to drink? Anything I can do for you?"

Peter laughed, his low, squeaky laugh that always made James smile along. "No thanks. I'm happy as a clam."

"That's all right then," James whispered soulfully and looked around. Only on second glance did he realise that a good distance away, someone was standing in the half shade, with his back to him, leaning on the small poplar at the edge of the property, looking into the clear night sky.

"Oh, is that Padfoot back there? Was wondering where he'd gone all of a sudden."

Remus turned hastily and followed James's gaze. "Oh right, yes."

Mary took a dramatic drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke through her nose. "Oh, how romantic." she chirped. "Remus, I think someone's waiting for his missing prince."

Remus rolled his eyes and stubbed out his only half-smoked cigarette. "This isn't some cliché novel of yours."

"Your loss," was all she said, grinning mischievously.

Despite his demonstrated coolness, Remus' steps were brisk as he walked to Sirius. James, Mary and Peter watched him as he approached from behind, gingerly putting his arms around him. Despite the dim light that made them almost merge into one, they could see Sirius turn his head and kiss him tenderly.

"Oh god, how adorable," Mary gushed. "And let Remus tell me again that wasn't straight out of a romance novel."

James peered over at Peter, who was also watching them. He hadn't known about their relationship for long, Sirius had only told him just before the attack on Moody. However, he didn't seem particularly bothered by it. James turned away from the lovebirds and smiled silently to himself.

"Sirius is in kind of a weird mood today, isn't he?" commented Peter suddenly into the silence.

James faltered. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just had a feeling. Could be wrong though."

James was about to ask further, but Peter was already waving it off. "Forget it. Why don't we talk about what kind of animal Daedalus Diggel is wearing around his neck?"

Mary let out a shrill laugh and got right into it.

"Oh God, yes! What is that supposed to be, a scarf? Looks like he's got the puked up balls of fur from my cat glued together."

James chuckled. "Shhh, not so loud Mary. He's sitting right by the entrance."

"I don't care. He can hear that!"

Peter's laughter grew louder too, so loud that a moment later they attracted Lily, red-cheeked and trying to fix her disintegrating hairdo as she joined their circle.

"Your cackling can be heard all the way inside."

In a fit of affection, he smooched Lily, who looked amused and waved her hand in front of her nose. "Whew, honey, you should slow down a bit with the punch."

"Anything for you, angel," James said only half-jokingly, which gave Mary the next laughing fit.

"Oh damn. If only Sirius and Remus could hear that."

"Then James wouldn't have a moment's peace," Lily commented, stroking James's cheek affectionately. "Don't ever change though, please."

"Don't worry."

"Well, speak of the devil." Mary pointed at Sirius and Remus returning, walking closely next to each other. Sirius had an reluctant smile on his face, Remus' expression was indistinct.

"Are you alright?" asked James, still a little unsettled by Peter.

Sirius nodded emphatically. "Sure. Everything's great. Bit of fresh air did me good."

"Definitely. You almost suffocate in there."

Lily nudged him. "We should still get back though. They're there for us."

"Yeah," James said drawn out. "Hang on a sec." He looked at his two best friends and an idea came. From the depths of his jacket, he pulled out his wand and waved it towards the pavilion. A moment later, a speaker appeared on the outside wall, exactly the same as inside. That earned him a few raised eyebrows.

"What are you trying to do? Are you going to play something for the roses?" asked Lily. James wasn't fazed.

"Nah, us. Just one song, something nice. And we'll dance." He looked at Remus and Sirius, meaningfully. "No excuses. Now it's just us."

"Ooh, James, you're really outdoing yourself today," Mary commented, tapping Peter on the shoulder. "Shall we stand guard? Box anyone who tries to get out?"

Peter, still visibly confused, nodded. "Sure, why not?"

Sirius and Remus gave each other a quick look that wavered between panic and mirth.

"Admit it, you just want to see me suffer, Potter," Remus merely muttered, not objecting. Sirius's gaze wandered several times towards the pavilion's empty entrance, but Mary's and Peter's bouncer stance seemed to reassure him.

"Well, that's settled then," James said, turning on the speaker with his wand, the perfect song in mind.

Sirius recognized it the second it started. He pulled Remus a few steps with him, before beginning to move hesitantly to the first lines, guiding Remus along. James took Lily by the hand and stood beside

them, any shame about his own dancing skills completely forgotten.

It was a very quiet song, so their movements were correspondingly slow. James held Lily close, enjoying this moment he had with her and his closest friends. This was exactly how it was supposed to be.

'Lonely rivers flow

To the sea, to the sea

To the open arms of the sea, yeah

Lonely rivers sigh

"Wait for me, wait for me"

I'll be coming home, wait for me'

All too soon it came to an end. As the last notes faded, he embraced Lily and whispered 'I love you' in her ear. Her hands felt soft on his back as she returned his embrace and his words.

When they broke away again, James saw that Remus and Sirius were in a very similar position. From where he stood, he could see Sirius's face leaning against Remus's shoulder, his eyes closed, quiet, content. Nothing else.

Nothing there, Peter. You were clearly wrong.

Remus's face was half hidden by Sirius's head, but James could see his eyes. He didn't look as peaceful as Sirius. He looked somehow... troubled.

When the next song started, *Ain't no Mountain high enough*, by Marvin Gaye, it brought back so many Hogwarts memories that James forgot the observation instantly. Sirius's and James's eyes met, and a meaningful grin followed.

It only took one pleading look at Lily for her to sigh in surrender and say, "All right, but we have to go back in after this."

"I promise!" vowed James lightly.

The song was huge fun. At the end, completely out of breath, he fell around his friends' necks.

"Great," he just muttered.

"Phew, James, how much punch have you had?" said Remus, trying to shield his nose from James' cloud of breath.

"Still not enough!" he announced, and at that Sirius readily got on board.

"I agree!"

They decided to go together for a refill. James put his arm over Sirius's shoulders on the way in and hugged him so tightly that he could barely walk any further.

"You're my very best friend in the whole world."

Sirius grinned. "And you're mine, idiot."

"I'm so glad I have you. You're the greatest. Honestly."

"Oh wow, you really are very drunk," Sirius commented, looking ahead.

"I'm just telling you the truth, Pads."

Sirius nodded, the smile now shallow. "Thanks. That means a lot to me."

"*You* mean a lot to me!"

"You better tone it down or people will start thinking you're marrying *me*."

"Noo, nonsense. I could never do that to Moony."

Arriving at the bar, they filled their glasses and toasted.

"Here's to the Marauders!" shouted James.

"To *you* and *Lily*," Sirius replied emphatically, once again that day the more sensible of the two.

The wedding party didn't end until late that night. James was having the time of his life. When he finally, in the early morning hours, lay in bed next to Lily, he felt a pleasant tingle in his chest.

"I wish the day had lasted forever." No more negative feelings, no more worries.

Lily, already half asleep, agreed with him. "It was perfect."

Perfect.

James was silent for a while. Then, quietly, dreamily, he finally replied:

"It was."

Almost.

He said

Let's grow old together

And die at the same time

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'To Lose My Life' by White Lies (2:25 to end>>>)
The song they danced to at the end: 'Unchained Melody' by the Righteous Brothers

I really like this chapter! Always wanted to write a Jilly wedding. And since there will be some angst coming our way soon, I used it to gather strength lmao.

See ya! <3

Chapter 27: Fighting

Chapter Notes

CW Depiction of Violence & Injuries (burn wounds), Mild Drug Use (Marihuana)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mr. Keuner hated fighting

but was involved in fighting all his life.

Regulus, Barty and Evan were sitting on one of the overgrown railway arches near Brick Lane, sharing a joint. Regulus had pointed out several times that there were about a billion nicer places in London, but Evan, as usual, wouldn't listen.

"The graffiti is the best here. They're real works of art in some places, I'm telling you."

"We're in East London, Rosier," Barty interjected boredly, "every fucking corner here is sprayed."

"But here at least some of the sprayers have got some skills."

"Yeah and if you're lucky you won't even get mugged walking along here at night."

"*Right*," Evan said sarcastically and handed the joint to Regulus, who eyed it critically. "Like *we* are just going to get robbed when we're out here. I don't think we give the most trustworthy impression."

Barty only half-heartedly suppressed his chuckle. "Nah, especially not you, with your new boxer nose."

Evan punched him on the shoulder so hard Barty nearly fell off the arch.

"Ouch!" He rubbed the spot. "Better save that for your next street fight. You can show the boys how it's done properly then."

"Shut the fuck up Crouch," Evan commented. He wasn't particularly vain, fortunately, or Barty would probably have been afraid for his

own nose.

There was a brief silence between them, which was eventually interrupted by Regulus's stifled cough. The next cause for amusement for Barty.

"Oh, sweet innocent Reg, is this actually your first joint?"

Regulus gave him a snide sideways glance. "Only because I was trying to learn something at Hogwarts and not getting high every night at the greenhouses with some Hufflepuffs."

"Oh, you shut up too," Evan snapped, audibly pissed. "We all know for a fact that you were just fucking some bird during that time. Don't try to talk your way out of it. Your flawless act isn't working."

Regulus hastily passed the joint and stared ahead, towards a dilapidated wall of a house where plaster had broken away in places amongst the colourful graffiti.

"I don't know what you mean at all."

"I told you not to talk your way out of this, Reg," Evan continued to clamour. "I may have been stoned for a lot of my time at Hogwarts, but I certainly wasn't that out of it."

Regulus put on his most confident smile and just gave Evan a meaningful look. That seemed to satisfy him.

"There you go."

He held his gaze for a moment before turning it forward again. Moving over Barty as he did so, he tried not to linger on him. He still couldn't look at him for too long. He knew too much. Far too much.

"Did you hear about the Snape thing?", Evan interrupted the slightly sweet-smelling silence and then took a long drag on the joint.

"Nah," Barty grumbled. "Everyone's in and out of Grimmauld Place, it feels like, but no one really talks to me."

"Must be Voldemort's instructions from the last meeting. Wants to prevent information from leaking out," Regulus contributed half-heartedly. Actually, he was in a position where he could probably find out anything he wanted. But he didn't give a damn. He had other things to do. To plan.

"Quite possibly," Evan muttered. "Anyway, Avery told me that Snape roughed up the entire Department of Magical Law Enforcement last week. Snuck an Imperius-puppet in and had half the files destroyed. Everything they had on us in terms of documents is rubble."

"You're serious?" Barty's eyes widened. "My father used to brag about how safe it all was. He said nothing ever gets lost there."

Evan shrugged. "I hear the department head is in big trouble. Nothing like this has ever happened there."

"My father will be pleased," Barty muttered quietly, bitterly.

"I find Snape really valuable. Who would have thought that after he was such a rag at school?"

Regulus shrugged. " He was always intelligent. Even if he always hung out with that... Evans."

"Who knows what went into that one. But for us, he's a trump card. He'll definitely do us more good in the long run than that fucking bastard Lupin."

"I don't think so," Barty objected. "Lupin's been a real asset to us. It's only because of him that we have all this first-hand info. We'd never have found the McKinnons otherwise. And who knows how long it would have taken with Roberts. He's our most valuable member right now."

Let's see for how much longer.

"He's still a stupid bastard," Evan grumbled. "He's lucky the Dark Lord fawns all over him."

"He certainly is hotheaded," Regulus agreed diplomatically, making Evan feel heard.

"And an asshole."

"...And an asshole."

Evan threw away the remains of the joint and propped his arms back, gazing up at the blue-violet evening sky. "I still wonder how Voldemort managed to turn him over. I don't remember him well, but Bellatrix said he used to be an enemy. Probably even hung out with your sodding brother."

As he often did, Regulus played dumb. "I don't know. Voldemort just assured me that we don't have to worry about him. And I trust him."

Evan nodded hastily. "Of course. So do I."

"There you go. And we'll make sure he doesn't break your nose again, too."

Evan shook his head, his gaze grim. "I dare him to touch me again. I'll beat him to a pulp."

"I'm sure you will," Barty mused, giving him a mischievous sideways glance.

They talked for a while longer, watching the sun slowly set. As the sun's rays left them and shadows crept over their limbs, Evan stretched and sighed in annoyance. "I don't feel like it at all, but I have to get back. Otherwise my parents will kill me."

Barty nodded understandingly. "All good."

"See you the day after tomorrow then?"

Regulus raised his thumb. "To the big day." There had been too many of those lately for Regulus's liking.

Evan grinned. "Looking forward to it." Then there was a crack and he was gone.

Just as Regulus was about to disapparate as well, he felt a hand on his arm. He winced.

"Do you have a moment to talk?" asked Barty, cautiously. The words triggered discomfort in Regulus. He hadn't avoided him for days for nothing. He shook off his hand.

"Not really," He considered just disappearing immediately. But where would he go? Back home, Barty would find him just the same. And judging by the look on his face, his patience was wearing thin.

"Reg, don't pretend. I can see what you're up to. I just want to get it out of the way. I don't want things to be this weird between us."

"There's really nothing to sort out. It was a one-time thing. Just forget about it." Regulus's words sounded a little too pressed to be

believable.

"It's not that simple. At least not for me."

Regulus stared at the facade of the house again, this time as intensely as if his life depended on it.

"It is for me." Fuck, he sounded like the biggest asshole. But it was still better than showing weakness.

Barty fell silent. A small part of Regulus wanted to see the look on his face. A much larger part was terrified of it.

"Is that enough?" asked Regulus into the silence as it burned painfully under his skin.

"Why are you like this?" Barty sounded bitter. "I thought we could talk about it. Like friends, that is."

Regulus remained quiet. Just the thought of talking about it... Reliving all the things he'd said, done that night... hard to bear.

"Shit" Barty ran his hand over his face. "I don't know what you want to hear. I'm sorry. I should have just let you go. I just... didn't want to be alone."

Regulus shivered as a cool gust of wind caught them. Or maybe the goosebumps came from something else entirely. Maybe it was from the mirror that had just been held up to him.

"Barty. Just don't. It was a fucking slip. End of story." *You heartless asshole. You stupid little miserable coward.*

"Wow, thanks a lot. You act like that was the biggest mistake of your life."

"It wasn't," Regulus sneered. "I just don't want to make the same mistake twice."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm bad luck. I ruin the people who get too close to me. You shouldn't have to go through this."

"What the hell are you doing? We're only 18 years old. Sometimes you really talk like a bitter old man who's already given up on life."

"I haven't given up."

I just don't live a life worth loving for.

"And then why d-"

"We" Regulus exhaled shakily. "We've talked about it now, right? I'm sorry. It won't happen again. Now can we please just pretend it didn't happen?"

Barty's gaze burned on his skin, screaming a thousand things at him. All of them bounced off Regulus, off his high wall. Then, eventually, Barty lowered his head.

"If that's what you want."

His voice sounded strained.

***

Things did not get better between them, on the contrary. The weeks passed, the war was as bloody as ever, and meanwhile they pretended that their friendship had not been severely damaged. They looked at each other, but never for too long. They spoke to each other, but the words were meaningless. It was like a badly rehearsed play.

Regulus occasionally, in weak moments, worried about it, wondered if he had hurt Barty's feelings. Sometimes he even came close to apologising to him and actually talking reasonably about the subject. But these impulses never lasted long, quickly disappearing again into the back of his mind, where everything that posed a potential danger landed. Anything that could distract him.

For a plan was forming. From insights Regulus gained between all the potions mixing and meetings, gathered in the dustiest corners of the house library, some of which he even had Kreacher whisper to him. It was happening much faster than expected.

The fact that he was assigned to a mission during the most intense phase of his preparations, of all things, annoyed him beyond measure. And what bugged him even more was the group he would be going with.

"Don't even look at me like that," was all Remus had said when he had appeared at his house in his Death Eater cloak, for once not on the verge of a nervous breakdown. "It isn't my fault. I don't even know what's planned this time."

Regulus just sighed and ushered Remus to the assembly room, where Barty was already sitting too, his eyes averted, along with Avery, Rabastan and Dolohov. The crème de la crème of shittiness. Regulus was already in no mood for it.

"Ah very well, we are complete then," Rodolphus said as he joined them a moment later. "Sit down, I'll brief you."

"Where are we even going this time?" asked Avery impatiently, legs crossed, arms folded. He seemed as uncomfortable as Regulus.

Rodolphus looked round with a significant smile.

"So, I hope you all like Quidditch..."

***

"What are you reading?" James had barely removed his Quidditch uniform before he was sitting next to Regulus on the wide windowsill, nudging him gently with his shoulder.

"It's a Muggle book. Probably don't know it anyway." He memorised the page number and flipped it shut. James peered at the cover and snorted in amusement. "The Steppenwolf? I've really never heard of that. What's it about?"

"It's about the existential crisis of a guy who's alienated himself from the world and is considering killing himself."

"Oh" James laughed uncertainly and put an arm around Regulus's waist. "That doesn't sound like an easy read."

"It's alright, actually. I haven't finished it yet, but I don't think he will do it. I think he'll find his place. Everyone finds it eventually."

"True." James kissed Regulus gently on the hair, then on the cheek. Regulus

loved when he did that.

"I'd be happy to lend it to you sometime."

James made a moderately enthusiastic noise. "You know I'm not too good with Muggle stories. They just confuse me."

"They're the best way to get to know them. And then I'd finally have someone to talk to about Harry Haller's mind. The man is driving me crazy."

"I guess that's the main character?" James took the book from Regulus' shand and gave it another quick glance before setting it aside. "Hmm, maybe I'll read it after all. I like the name."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "I want you to read it for the meaning behind it, not because you think the name is great."

"You're impossible to please, Reg. Do you want me to read it or not?" James pulled Regulus into his arms and began showering him with feather-light kisses. Regulus smirked and returned the tight embrace. James smelled familiar, was wonderfully warm. Home.

"You won't anyway, let's face it."

James's mouth twisted into a mischievous smile. "Oh who knows. You can talk me into almost anything, can't you?"

Just not to keep you away from me.

Just not to save you while you still can.

Regulus kissed James on the mouth, imagining as always that it was the last time. Since that last time would come eventually, Regulus already knew. The first, exciting, naïve days were long ago. The end was only a matter of time.

Only his heart had to realise this fact now. But as always, when James was this close to him, touching him and at some point sighing his name, it did anything but.

It would be his downfall.

***

Of course it was about killing someone. This time it was just bigger, riskier, more annoying. Three high-ranking members of the Ministry of Magic had to die because they were in the way. And because they couldn't be reached at the Ministry, they waited until they crawled out of their hole. Until they went to watch a game between the Falmouth Falcons and the Appleby Arrows at the biggest Quidditch stadium in the whole of England.

Bloody Quidditch. Made these idiots all careless.

"Hey, old hag, watch where you're going!" a chubby guy snapped at Regulus after grazing him as he walked past. He stank disgustingly of sweat.

"Sorry," Regulus just mumbled, against his flaring anger, and gathered his long flowered skirt. No drawing attention to himself. It would be hard enough to do his job as it was.

Lowering his head slightly and half-hiding his eyes under the brim of his hat, Regulus peered up the bleachers. It was still half empty, no one of the targets was in sight yet. Regulus had only seen a few pictures anyway and probably wouldn't recognise them at all. Instead, Rodolphus had advised him to concentrate on suspicious-looking aurors. They always clustered where the targets were most rewarding.

As the throngs of Quidditch fans poured into the stadium, Regulus pretended to pause in front of the staircase and leaned on his walking stick. Out of the corner of his eye, he tried to spot one of his allies, took a few minutes, then saw the unassuming short man one tier over who was in the process of cleaning his glasses. Avery.

A quick nod, then Regulus set about slowly climbing the stairs. He simply prayed that the doomed would stay clear of his rank. That in the best case he was too far away to take part in the murders, that he could simply run away after the others were done, quickly back to his study. He had better things to do anyway.

He got into position at his rank and waited. He almost slapped his hands over his face when, fifteen minutes later, he saw the officials, together with their entourage of aurors, taking their seats only a few metres away from him.

What did you expect?

Resignedly, he waited for the commotion surrounding the arrival to die down, continuing to sit on the vacated edge seat, his wrinkled hands resting on his walking stick. He looked at the Quidditch pitch in front of him as if waiting for the game to begin. Periodically, when it wasn't too conspicuous, he took in the Aurors. There were three of them, two women, one man, all with sombre, haggard faces. They looked around intently, would probably spot an incoming attack very early. It would not be easy.

To his left was Avery, he too had already scouted the targets. To his right was Remus, thankfully. The three of them would be the main players thanks to their position. He couldn't use someone stupid like Rabastan or solitary like Dolohov anyway. With Barty, too, he was just glad when he didn't have to see him right now.

Remus would do his job well, as always. Too well, perhaps. It was scary sometimes, the things he heard about him. A little ashamed of himself, Regulus was secretly banking on the fact that Remus would do a lot of the dirty work on this too.

They had agreed to wait at least half an hour into the game, hoping that the Aurors would slacken their attention a little. Regulus had only finished two servings of Polyjuice Potion for all the group members, so there wasn't too much leeway.

It took an eternity until they had reached the targeted time window. Regulus was interested in Quidditch, but not with a murder plot in mind. The crowd shrieked, cheered, booed at a particularly nasty foul, while Regulus just wanted it to be over.

Just as he was drinking as unobtrusively as possible from an unglamorous flask, a tall, straw-blond man sat down three seats next to him in the only other empty seat in the row. Remus had moved into position.

Avery had also moved closer. He paced up and down the aisle, simulating a stubborn cramp, miming the snivelling man in his mid-forties worryingly well. They were getting ready for the signal. Rodolphus would take care of that personally. So it would be effective.

The bang was gigantic. So was the fireball that shot up into the sky behind the northern flank of the spectator stands and silenced the

entire stadium for a moment. All eyes were on it, on the dancing flames that magically spun their circles, almost hypnotising.

It was their moment. Regulus stood up unnoticed, completely tunnel-visioned with agitation. He drew his wand, raised his arm and only then saw that Remus and Avery had already fired. Avery turned his attention to the Aurors, bombarding them with curses, drawing complete attention to himself for a few moments. Remus went all out: eyes wide, he shouted the Death Curse and instantly killed two of the targets. Regulus aimed at the third, who had barely realised what had happened to his colleagues. The words already on his lips, he suddenly saw Dowson in front of him again, begging him to spare his family. The words disappeared, instantly. He could not say them. No way.

As if that had been his plan all along, he pointed his wand at the Aurors instead and disarmed one of them. This way he helped both Avery and his conscience.

The third official lived perhaps three seconds longer, thanks to Regulus's mercy. Even among the surging chaos, the shouting of the crowd, the panic, Remus did not lose sight of the mission. He raised his wand again, with deadly precision, shoved aside two youths trying to get out of the line of fire and killed the last target as well. Regulus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Get out of here!" roared Remus, pointing across the last row of seats toward freedom. Through the chaos of the masses trying to get down the crowded stairs, shouts of a different sort could soon be heard. Resistance. Had the Order arrived yet?

It took them a few moments to disengage Avery from the last Auror capable of fighting and jump over the high rail at the back. Regulus struggled the most with this in his frail body, but adrenaline overcame even his low physical limits and allowed him to leap out of harm's way in time.

"Well done!" yelled Remus in free fall, giving both thumbs up. Regulus didn't respond and instead made sure they didn't smash on the ground below. A protective spell had been put up about two hundred yards around the stadium, preventing Apparating and Disapparating. The first crowds of people could be seen running in panic across the invisible boundary to get home to safety. If all went smoothly, Regulus and the others would follow them there in a moment.

"Have you seen the rest?" called Avery as soon as they landed.

"No," Remus replied, shooing Regulus and him towards freedom with sweeping arm movements. "We can't wait though, let's get out of here."

Just as they were about to leave, they heard another bang, just a few feet beside them. The crowd scattered in panic, revealing three people. Three Order members, Regulus quickly realised.

"You bastards, you're not getting away from me this time!" shouted the middle one of them, a tall woman who looked vaguely familiar to Regulus. She had a hardened, joyless face, hatred seething in it like lava. Dangerous.

But Regulus did not dwell on her for long, his gaze inevitably wandered to the person to her left. With no less determination, scowling, his wand clutched tightly, stood his brother.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he heard Remus say beside him, and moments later he was grabbed firmly by his shoulder. "We have to go."

Regulus, a deep fear in his chest, shook his head mirthlessly. "Do you think they'll let us?" He raised his wand, at his own brother, whom he despised so much and yet whom he had no intention of harming in any way.

"Cut the crap," Remus talked at him, unusually insecure. It was so obvious.

Avery didn't hesitate, unlike them. He shot the first curse at the woman, who deflected it in one swift movement. Sirius replied, sighting Regulus and bellowing, "Expelliarmus!"

It was Remus who deflected the spell, Regulus could not have reacted in time. Remus fired back, but not an Unforgivable, as would be usual for him, but simple little school spells. Sirius, the woman and the third, a tall blond wizard, fended them off effortlessly. They were a well-rehearsed team.

The fight lasted far too long. With Remus and Regulus trying to do damage control on both sides, they were quickly stuck in a stalemate, perhaps 50 yards from freedom and helpless against possible follow-on forces from the Order.

"What's the matter with you?" roared Avery, as he fired one curse after

another. "Are you asleep?"

Remus did respond with slightly harsher curses, but directed exclusively at the blond or the woman. The tip of his wand didn't even come close to Sirius. Regulus, meanwhile, pondered feverishly. There had to be a way...

"STUPOR!" yelled Barty out of nowhere, hitting Sirius in the back. Instantly he slumped and lay motionless on the floor.

"No!" shouted Remus and Regulus had to hold the idiot down so he didn't run to him and get himself killed.

"He's fine! Get a hold of yourself!"

Remus paused for a second, collecting himself, and Regulus meanwhile watched Barty open a second flank and divide the attention of the remaining Order members. This was their moment.

"Obsidio!" shouted Remus, a spell Regulus had never heard before. He hit the blond with it, who instantly dropped his wand and grabbed his neck. It was some kind of choking spell, a really bad one. How did Remus know something like that?

The woman was so distracted for a moment by the agony of her teammate that Avery managed to disarm her. Regulus would not let this chance pass.

"Let's get out of here!" he roared as soon as Remus had brought the blond to the ground. The four of them ran off, heading for safety. It was almost done.

"NO! You're not getting away from me!" the woman roared, completely beside herself. The venom in her voice made Regulus's insides shudder. He glanced back briefly, saw her snatch a wand from Sirius and raise her arm. Regulus wanted to -

"BOMBARDA MAXIMA!"

A puff of air, a hiss, eerie silence. Then, a shove, Regulus lost his balance. He fell to the side, raised his arms, saw the ground approaching.

A bang. Everything went white. Regulus hit the ground. An unbearable wave of heat whipped over him, scorching his clothes, squeezing all the air out of his lungs. Cries of pain pierced through the

roar, through the conflagration. Regulus tried to make out something, but had to close his eyes against the heat.

It only lasted a moment. Then the heat, the bright light, the fire disappeared again. A second later it seemed as if nothing had ever happened.

Regulus reacted while the adrenaline was still there. He grabbed his wand as if his life depended on it and shouted, "Stupor!" He caught her, thankfully. She went down and Regulus scrambled to his feet, trying to make out something between the settling ash and the smoke.

Several people were on the ground, Remus, Barty, Avery, two civilians. Regulus got shakily to his feet, approached his companions. Avery looked all right, stirring, seemed conscious. Barty and Remus, on the other hand...

"Shit," Regulus whispered breathlessly. "Avery?" A groan. "Can you get up? We have to, we have to get them..."

"Hey!" A shout. Regulus never thought in his entire life that he would one day be so glad to hear Rabastan's voice.

"Holy shit, what happened here?"

Regulus shook his head violently, trying to ignore his dizziness. "Help me pull them out of the protective circle!"

Rabastan, for once in his life, didn't ask a stupid question and obeyed, embracing Barty who lay motionless on his side and began to pull him away in a rautek grip. Regulus tended to Remus, hardly daring to look at him, his charred clothes, the wounds. Fuck, this was a disaster.

Avery managed to pull himself up, helped Regulus gently carry the overlarge Remus out of the line of fire, and together they apparated away from this stadium, this hell-trap.

Regulus could hardly wait to put an end to all this madness.

***

They had Narzissa come as support, this time. They had too many injured and Regulus didn't know anything about burns, apart from the

fact that he himself was completely out of it. He and Kreacher turned the meeting room into a small lazarette, set up folding beds and laid Barty, Remus and Avery on them. In the time until Narcissa arrived, they peeled the burnt clothes off the injured and administered first aid. Avery had only been hurt on the arm, the rest of the fireball had whizzed past him. Barty and Remus had been hit in the back. They were lying on their stomachs, halfway between unconsciousness and painful wakefulness. Regulus could barely look.

"What happened?" asked Narcissa in horror as she entered the room, her arms already full of ointments and potions. Regulus succinctly summarised the events to her again as she put down her things and made a first assessment.

"And who let that firestorm loose?" she asked, pale as she looked at Remus's dark red shoulders.

"That was Dorcas Meadowes," Avery commented, her face contorted in pain. "Remember that bitch from Hogwarts. Real beast."

"Voldemort needs to know," Narcissa said, uncorking the first of her potions. "She can't get away with it."

Regulus was aware that Dorcas Meadowes certainly had more than enough reasons for her unbridled hatred. But a part of him, a scared, worried, angry part, clingingly agreed with Narcissa.

Regulus helped Narcissa administer a potion to Remus and Barty for the pain. Then they began to treat the burns, Regulus doing in parallel to Barty what he saw Narcissa doing to Remus. Along the way, Kreacher crept around them, providing them with fresh cloths and clean water.

It took a long time, a very long time. Narcissa was a really good healer, could have had a great career as a medic if their family hadn't had other plans for her. Still, she fought to save the skin, using all the magic she could muster. Regulus did the same, giving everything he had. But even as the Polyjuice Potion slowly wore off and Regulus regained his own body, it did nothing to counteract the leaden heaviness in his limbs. At some point, as he briefly blacked out, he felt a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Get some rest, Reg," Narcissa whispered, jet-black shadows under her eyes. "We've done what we need to do. We'll continue in the morning."

Regulus shook his head. "No, I...I can still..." Narcissa grabbed him by

the other shoulder as well, holding him upright.

"I've got everything under control," she said sternly. "You're completely beside yourself, you'll make a mistake if you don't rest. Lie down for a few hours and I'll come and get you if anything is wrong."

Regulus had no more strength to complain. Completely lost, he shuffled up the stairs, threw off his ruined woman's clothes and fell into bed. He barely felt himself touch the pillow before he was gone.

When he woke up again, the sun was shining through his window. He sat up abruptly and winced again as he felt the pain running through his whole body. He looked at his forearm, only now noticing the oozing burn marks. Groaning, he rose and lifted his shirt to look at himself in the mirror. He had several such marks, they stood out abundantly against his pale skin. Why hadn't he noticed them yesterday?

He carefully pulled something on before descending the stairs and returning to the meeting room, where a busy Kreacher greeted him with a bow.

"Can Kreacher get Master Regulus something to eat?"

Regulus nodded absently, his mind already elsewhere. Narcissa had apparently continued to work overnight. Remus's scorched hair had been shaved off, the blisters had disappeared and the skin was thankfully no longer oozing. Though his back was still bright red and the skin irritated, her tireless treatment seemed to be having an effect. Barty looked much better too, had even kept his hair. Regulus hoped they both suffered as few scars as possible.

There was no sign of Avery, presumably Narcissa had already dismissed him. She herself was sitting on the now vacant cot leaning against the wall and had nodded off. He looked at her for a while, her silky blonde hair and even features. She was probably the only tolerable relative he had, besides Andromeda.

Remus's slight groan drew his attention away from his cousin. Regulus knelt beside the bed, trying to get into Remus's limited field of vision as he woke up.

"Good morning," Regulus said in a decidedly good mood. "How are you?"

"Ugh," was all Remus did and closed his eyes again, pained.

"I know," Regulus agreed with him, trying to think of what to say. "Do you remember what happened?"

Remus nodded. "Dorcas."

"Yeah." Regulus tried to suppress his flaring anger. "Got you and Barty pretty good."

Remus nodded again, silent for a moment. "Shit."

"Don't worry. Everything's going to be alright. Cissy and I treated you guys. It doesn't look too bad, though it probably doesn't feel like it."

"No," Remus agreed, groaning again in suppressed pain. "I hate fire, explosions, all that shit."

"Not just you."

Remus opened his eyes again. They were bloodshot, searching his gaze.

"But I'm glad you got away okay."

Regulus returned the look, suddenly filled with a sense of certainty.

"It was you, wasn't it?" He bit his lower lip. "You pushed me out of the way."

Remus shrugged, seemingly regretting it instantly. When he had recovered from the pain, he tried words instead. "There was still time for that."

"You saved my ass," Regulus stated, barely able to believe it.

"Well someone had to."

"...Thank you," he mumbled, as it began to work inside him. Was this also a result of his little memory experiment? This chivalrous posturing? This...

Selflessness?

But he had been back for days. He hadn't taken any potions for days, and just before the incident he had still impressively shown that he had no scruples whatsoever. So what was that all about?

Regulus was glad that at that moment Kreacher came by with breakfast and something to drink and changed the topic of conversation to something else. He helped Remus get a drink and gave him a few bites to eat. Shortly after, he had dozed off again.

Regulus continued to think about his puzzling behaviour for a while before he shook his head and joined Barty instead. He looked at him in silence, his slightly pursed lips, his chest rising regularly, his reddened back. Following a sudden impulse, he took his hand. The light touch was enough to wake him up. His face contorted, his eyes opened the tiniest crack. As if stung, Regulus jerked his hand back again.

"Sorry," he said hurriedly, curling his fingers into the frame of the cot instead.

When Barty recognised him, he smiled. "What are you sorry for?"

"Nothing."

Barty tried to move his body a little, to shift into a slightly more comfortable position, but none of it seemed to bring relief.

"Do you have another pillow for me, by any chance?" he croaked, and Regulus immediately jumped up to comply with his request. He fetched one from the living room, returned to him and placed it under his face so that he no longer had to press his cheek against the hard-stretched polyester.

"That better?" he asked and Barty nodded in relief.

"Much."

Regulus knelt beside him again. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit. Everything hurts."

Regulus nodded sorrowfully. "It was really intense, too. But don't worry. You're going to make a full recovery."

"Except I can probably forget about a modelling career now?" quipped Barty in a raspy voice and Regulus smiled.

"That wouldn't have worked out with your attitude anyway."

"Won't see that in the photos."

Regulus, not further engaging in the joke, looked at him insistently, trying to signal that he meant what he said next:

"It will be alright. Cissy did really well. You won't see much after that."

Barty grinned. "Oh, and if I do, it's not so bad. I'm glad to be alive. And that you're all right."

Regulus nodded, struggling to hold his gaze. Was this the right moment?

"I... I hope you know I really care about you, Barty." Barty's grin instantly gave way to a serious, attentive look. That one was even harder to take.

"I don't want... this one thing to undermine that. I hope you know you can always come to me if you have something. You're my best friend." Regulus couldn't help it, he lowered his eyes.

Barty was silent. For a long time. It was unpleasant, almost unbearable. Then it was him who sought Regulus's cramped hand, enclosing it with his warm fingers. Regulus's gaze shot upwards. A smile glittered at him, actually a good sign. But the closer Regulus looked at it, the heavier his heart grew.

"Okay," was all Barty said, holding his fake smile for a few seconds longer.

Regulus knew that look on his face. Far too well. If he had needed any more proof, he had it now.

He had ruined everything.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner/Stories of Mr Keuner' by Bertolt Brecht (<3)

So, some action! :) Always having fun with those scenes.

Hope you liked the chapter.

See ya!

Chapter 28: Voices

Chapter Notes

> CW Mental Distress, Vomiting, Mild Drinking, Sexual Content (between the words 'this time' and 'he sank' , they are written in bold letters and underlined as always, if you want to skip it)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So endlessly

These voices keep on calling me to rise

These voices keep on praying for me

I can't stop them now

The days after the fight at the Quidditch stadium were shitty. Remus couldn't take part in any more missions, was condemned to lie face down on that crappy cot and wait until his back would cooperate again. He spent at least two thirds of that time coming up with a suitable story for Sirius. Because even if they did fix his skin like new, he couldn't cover up the hair. Sirius adored it, he would surely be completely distraught. Remus would be lying if he said he wasn't mourning it a little too.

He devoted the remaining time to the upcoming third of November, Sirius's birthday. A day that had been looming over him for days, staring down at him, urging him to be careful. He was terrified of it.

His headache was only one reason for it, albeit the weightiest. The third of November was in the middle of the lunar cycle, any assuaging distance from Sirius was weeks away. It was going to be hell.

Still, he knew now, even if still pumped full of potions and completely beside himself, that he had to do everything he could to make this day

perfect. Not only for Sirius's battered mental state, but also for their relationship and consequently for his information gathering. Since his sudden disappearance almost two months ago, the grass had not really grown back.

Though Sirius had improved considerably during the wedding and his long presence, Remus still noticed that something was off about him. And it bugged him that he couldn't quite put it into words.

But on the third of November he would make up for it. At least he hoped he would. If his goddamn back finally stopped hurting by then.

***

Sirius smelled familiar as Remus crawled under the covers beside him. He paused for a moment, breathing in the scent, tasting the last remnants of Regulus's potion on his tongue. He had gotten himself so drugged up, there was no way he could get a headache at all. It would be all right, Remus was sure of that.

"Wake up," he whispered and put an arm across Sirius's chest, blew a kiss on his ear. "Happy birthday."

Sirius took a deep breath and then made a deeply theatrical noise, as if he'd just been shown the entirety of the cruel world.

"What kind of birthday is that when you're beaten out of bed early in the morning?"

"It's 1 pm, love. And we have plans for today."

"Mmm," Sirius made and turned to Remus, looking at him with tired eyes. "I'm curious then."

"You can be." He kissed him on the mouth, stroking his shaggy hair. "The day is just ours."

***

By the time he got Sirius out of bed, it was almost 2pm. But from then on, everything went like clockwork. First a very late breakfast, then a trip into the city. They shopped for clothes, (Sirius had taken a fancy to this punk thing, he now owned a whole bunch of black clothes and two pairs of Doc Martens), and picked out a movie for the evening showing they would attend (Mad Max). They used the time until the movie started to pay a visit to the nearby cemetery.

"Haven't been there in far too long," Sirius commented quietly as they roamed the rows of gravestones looking for Marlene's.

"True," Remus replied monosyllabically. Actually, he didn't want anything to dampen the mood today. But he would probably only make it worse if he tried to talk him out of it.

They found the gravestone eventually. Sirius conjured a bunch of colourful flowers on the small pedestal and took Remus by the hand. Remus looked resolutely at the ground, not wanting to read her name or what was written underneath. He didn't like it, it made him feel uneasy. He couldn't have that, not when he had to do everything imaginable to keep his wits about him as it was.

"Did you know Dorcas and Marlene were together?" Sirius broke the silence at one point.

"Yes, Marlene told me at my birthday." Brief hesitation. "How did you know?"

"Dorcas was talking about it. At one of our last shifts."

"At the one at the Quidditch stadium?" asked Remus innocently. He felt Sirius tighten his grip on Remus's hand.

"No, not there. Sometime later, just before you came back."

"I see."

"I think we should be a bit more supportive of Dorcas. She really is a good person. And she's been through a lot in the last few months."

There were few people at the moment that Remus felt less pity for than Dorcas Meadowes. His back looked all right again, but every single scar she had given him in her fury was one less reason to help her with anything. Her days were numbered anyway. Voldemort had heard of her attack and he was furious. He would deal with her personally.

"She never struck me as wanting much to do with us."

"That's not true at all. She's really nice. Marlene loved her, how much more proof do you need?"

"Hmm," Remus didn't want to talk about her. "If you say so."

He could almost feel Sirius rolling his eyes. "I'll invite her over sometime soon."

"You do that."

Hopefully he wasn't there then.

***

Mad Max was exactly the kind of movie Remus knew Sirius would love. It had action, wacky costumes, and most of all, lots of fancy muggle stuff. The audience was good too, it was a preview, so only people who really wanted to see the film were there. Sirius's eyes were glued to the screen, especially Mel Gibson in his leather jacket and when they walked out of the cinema after the film, the first thing he said was:

"I need a motorbike, Moony."

A resounding success.

Afterwards, Remus was actually planning to return home, but Sirius managed to persuade him to have "one" beer. Somehow he couldn't say no this time. Maybe it was the euphoria after two hours of good action. And maybe Sirius would finally stop raving to him about that one Muggle beer.

They found one of the many pubs in the middle of Soho, where there was just enough going on to disappear among the other guests, but the volume was still pleasant. Sirius was euphoric.

"I finally got you." He gestured to the bartender to place an order. "Thought that was never going to happen."

Probably would have been better.

"But really just one pint, okay?" repeated Remus as Sirius ordered, his most charming smile on.

"Yeah, sure, Moony darling," he fluted, turning back to him. Not for the first time, his eyes wandered over Remus's military-looking haircut.

"I still can't get used to it," he said with an uncertain smile. "For as long as I've known you, you've had your curls. You look very different without them."

Remus ran his fingers over his short stubble, which was thankfully already growing back eagerly.

"Oh who knows, maybe I'll leave it like that," he said thoughtfully, amused as Sirius's eyes widened in horror. "Then I'll grow a full beard to match it and only wear plaid shirts. I think the lumberjack lifestyle would suit me."

Relieved, Sirius rolled his eyes. "Don't you at least need something resembling muscles for that?"

"Oh, not necessarily. It's all about the technique."

"Have you ever held an axe in your life?"

"Hmm." When Remus smiled caught, Sirius raised an eyebrow triumphantly. The two pints arrived and he accepted them patronisingly.

"Now try it, it's great," Sirius proclaimed, placing the beer on his coaster. Remus raised the glass, looked Sirius in the eye, "Here's to your birthday," and took a sip. Maybe it was the high expectation. But it really didn't taste that great after all.

"Well," he said diplomatically, putting the glass back. "It's drinkable."

"Ugh, underwhelming," Sirius sighed theatrically, "As always with you."

Remus's eyebrow shot up. "What do you mean by that?"

Sirius shrugged cluelessly and cast a pointed look at his fingernails.

"Oh nothing at all, Moony. Nothing at all."

"Now don't get cocky."

Sirius took a big gulp and looked at him in amusement. "Oh, and what if I did, what would you do?"

"Don't provoke it." Remus knew Sirius was only joking, but still it stirred something inside him. Something that could mean trouble.

Instead of knowing better though, he returned Sirius's gaze, holding it, feeling the mood shift very quickly. It didn't get any better when he felt Sirius's foot slowly brush up his leg. Remus's throat suddenly went dry, but he still couldn't look away.

Finally it was Sirius who closed his eyes, smiled softly and took another sip from his beer. Remus stared at his throat as he swallowed, at the way his Adam's apple moved. He swallowed too, unconsciously.

With a dark, unmistakable look on his face Sirius wiped the foam from his upper lip.

"Drink up Moony, we've got things to do."

And so it really only stayed at one beer.

***

This time they didn't make it to the bedroom. They barely made it into the flat. Remus knew it was a bad idea, he always did. But he just didn't stand a chance against it, no alarm bell in the world could get through to him right now, not when Sirius pushed him down on the couch and sat astride him. Not when he rolled his hips, kissed his neck and gasped softly in his ear.

Remus let his hands roam over Sirius's body, pressing them down on his ass, bringing them even closer together, feeling even through their jeans how turned on they both were.

"I told you..." gasped Sirius, pushing his hips further forward, until Remus was breathless. "underwhelming."

"Oh, shut up," Remus rumbled.

"Make me."

Before Sirius could react, Remus had already turned them around and

was pressing Sirius into the cushion. Oh, he'd make sure that smug grin disappeared for good.

"I know that look on your face, Padfoot. What have you got planned again? How many weeks of detention will it be this time?"

Sirius's grin had indeed faded as he lay beneath him, exposed, with two fingers inside him. Only Remus hadn't managed to shut him up with that, quite the opposite.

"F-fuck," he gasped as Remus hit the exact right spot. He moved against his fingers, greedy, impatient.

"I intend to," Remus merely murmured and pulled them out again, taking his cock in his hand and positioning it at Sirius's entrance. In one slow motion, he pushed into him, earning a stifled moan. Bending far over him, he began to move slowly.

"Yes, like- that...," Sirius breathed as his legs wrapped around his hips, his fingers clawing firmly into his back.

***"Don't worry about me, guys, I'll be a bit late tonight. Got some things to... prepare. But I'll be back before the transformation*!"**

Sirius's head sank to the couch, eyes fluttering shut. He was taking him so well, leaving scratches on his back, his moans music in Remus's ears. The sight of him burned itself onto his retinas.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck! Oh god, fuck! Snape? What the hell are you doing here? Moony, stop! You have to stop-"

At some point, when Remus felt he was getting close, he increased his pace, fucked Sirius until he -.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to... I don"t know what I was thinking."

"Just get out."

He came with a breathless moan, feeling goosebumps cover his entire body, watching with satisfaction as Sirius, too, -

"I can't forgive you. Not this time. You went too far."

"I know it was a shitty move, it was ... I just wasn't thinking."

"You never do."

"And I'm sorry for that."

"Get the fuck out of here."

"Moony-"

He sank down on Sirius, completely beside himself. Felt Sirius's arms around him, loose now, relaxed, familiar. Only when he found his

breath again, blood rushing back to his head and he gathered his wits, only then did he realise what a horrible, unbearable headache he had.

"I love you," Sirius whispered against his ear, infinitely soft. He could barely hear it anymore.

"I..."

"What are you thinking? What do you even know about love, Remus? You can't possibly understand how I feel."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Your mother... she didn't make it."

"As always, you are too late to my class, Mr. Lupin. Maybe two weeks detention will help you be on time in the future."

"Do you think they'll treat you normally when they find out what you are? You're risking your future if you get too involved with these boys."

"You have to be careful with Sirius, Moony. He'd never admit it, but he's very scared. Of a lot of things. But most of all, of losing the people who matter most to him."

"I hope you guys know you mean the world to me. I don't know where I'd be without you."

"You slacker," Sirius' amused voice came through to him as if through a thick veil. "Are you going to lie there like that forever?"

Remus was on the verge of a breakdown. Hovering between countless images and voices that pelted at him without making sense. And yet, the desire to pretend everything was fine in front of Sirius was greater.

"Preferably... yes." He straightened up, half blind, trying not to lose his balance. "I'm just going to... go to the bathroom."

"All right."

Remus stood up, peripherally aware of Sirius sitting up as well, running his fingers through his hair. He struggled up the stairs, each step a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Once in the bathroom, his legs gave way. He crawled to the toilet, vomited in it, clung shakily to the toilet bowl as if his life depended on it.

"James is clearly not well, but he won't talk about it. Do you think I should try anyway? I can hardly stand to see him like this."

"Don't worry about it guys. I've looked a lot worse."

"Piss off, Snivellus! Keep your nose out of things that don't concern you!"

STOP!

"Stop," Remus repeated miserably, trying to bring himself back to the real world. He realised what he must look like, bent over the toilet completely naked, trapped in schizophrenic hallucinations. Sirius couldn't see him like this. With the utmost effort, he rose, looked towards the shower. Water, cold water, that would probably do him good.

He struggled to get into the shower, one hand pressed to the wall, trying miserably to keep his balance. The water didn't help, not at all. A few minutes later he gave it up, got out again shivering, dried himself and wrapped the towel around his hips. He took a deep breath, stepped outside, and quickly into the bedroom. There he rummaged for a pair of trousers, pulled them on, and dropped the towel carelessly on the floor. Briefly, he glanced at the balcony. Would a smoke help him? Probably not. But it was still worth a try.

Remus pushed open the balcony door and stepped into the cool darkness. There was a light drizzle, which was actually quite pleasant. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. The voices were bubbling very close under the surface, they could strike again at any moment, Remus was helpless against them. He had to get to Regulus, he had to put an end to this.

Just before he finished his smoke, he heard Sirius come into the bedroom and turned to him. Smiled at him as if all was well, as if he could even formulate a straight sentence right now. He waited until Sirius had settled into bed before he pressed the filter into the ashtray and took a deep breath. He could do this. Sirius would fall asleep in a moment, then he could go, then he wouldn't be suspicious in the slightest.

Remus turned out the light so Sirius couldn't see his face. He stumbled into bed, allowing Sirius to possess him, snuggling up to him and whispering, "Thank you for today. I had a really great time."

"Anything for you, Sirius," he replied mechanically, unable to even begin to feel the relief of success. Everything inside him was spinning out of control.

And a moment later, finally, Sirius fell asleep. Remus waited barely five minutes before he was already gingerly peeling himself out of the embrace, struggling out of bed, pulling something on and staggering out of the room. If he didn't get one of Regulus's potions quickly, he wouldn't make it through this night.

***

"Shit dude, what's up with you?" Barty stumbled back a step as Remus nearly slammed the front door in his face.

"Where's Regulus?" he gasped, struggling not to throw up on the doormat.

"Oh, are you having one of those... fits? Reg was telling me about it."

Oh great, that Reg is telling that around so freely.

"I need his help."

"He's not back yet. But I can take you to his workroom. He's got something prepared in case you show up."

Barty held his arm out to him, like he wanted to help an old woman across the street. Remus just grunted and staggered past Barty. "I know the way!"

"Okay, chill." The idiot almost looked amused. Remus couldn't stand him.

No more voices came until they reached the room, thankfully; and he managed to not embarrass himself in front of Barty. On the desk he found some potions, neatly lined up and labelled, a letter next to them. Remus tore it open roughly, reading the few, sweepingly written lines:

'Hello Remus,

is just a precaution in case you get your timing wrong again tonight and need my help. Given the date, that's not even unlikely.

These potions will help you. Take them from left to right, one sip at a time. Then lie down, rest. In a few hours, you'll be as good as new.

I'll check on you when I get back.

Sweet dreams.

Remus threw the letter aside and followed his instructions. Less than ten seconds later, he had consumed the potions and looked determinedly at Barty. "I'm supposed to lie down now, I may be about to-"

And then everything already went black.

***

"A Black, Remus? Have you gone completely mad?"

His father sat across from him at the dining room table, his hands spread wide and propped on the edges of the table. His gaze was far too familiar to Remus. Concerned, scolding, disappointed.

"I told you to stay away from families like them.The Blacks are dangerous, don't you understand?"

"You don't even know Sirius!" Remus glared angrily at his father. "He's not like the rest of his family. And he doesn't want to be like them either. He hates them as much as you do."

Remus could see that he didn't believe him. He put on that fatherly, condescending look, as if Remus was particularly slow on the uptake.

"I know that's what you're thinking. But you have to trust me on this, Remus. I've known the Blacks, for many years. Every single one of them is corrupted. It's in their blood. Sirius will be no exception. It's not going to end well with him, I can promise you that."

Remus hated it when his father talked to him like that. Hated that he hadn't trusted him to make a single decision on his own since the werewolf had bitten him. He'd had enough of it.

"Sirius isn't..."

"I don't want you around him, end of discussion."

Remus felt defiance welling up inside him, cold anger. He wanted to just get up and leave. But that would only make it worse again.

"...Okay," he therefore said through clenched teeth, seeing his father's satisfied nod.

He had always been bad at spotting Remus's lies.

When Remus woke up, he was again lying on one of those awful cots, set up in the living room. Barty was sitting in an armchairs, bolt upright, his eyebrows drawn together in worry.

"What time is it?" asked Remus in a raspy voice. It wasn't morning yet, was it? Surely Sirius would still be asleep when he got back...?

"A little before three," Barty muttered. "You were asleep for just under two hours."

Remus felt like he'd been thrown under a bus, no relief like last time. This whole memory thing was getting worse. At an alarmingly fast rate.

"Where's Regulus? Is he here now?"

Barty's look made Remus pause for a moment. He looked worried.

"No, he's not back yet." Barty kneaded his fingers. "Though he should be, by now."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No, he made a huge secret out of it. Even took Kreacher with him, though he never does that."

"Kreacher?" Remus sat up and frowned. "Did Voldemort put him up to something? Maybe that's why he wasn't allowed to talk about it?"

Barty lowered his eyes. "Could be." He didn't sound convinced. "But he was in a weird mood earlier too, didn't recognise him at all."

"It'll be all right. Regulus knows what he's doing, doesn't he?"

"I hope so." The concern in his voice was almost palpable. It managed to infect Remus. An uneasy feeling spread through him.

Please don't do anything stupid, Regulus.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Voices' by Hurts

Next chapter marks the halfway point of the fic plotwise.
You can probably already guess the PoV.

See ya!

Chapter 29: Into The Dark

Chapter Notes

CW Pain, Mental Distress

I feel like this is a good moment to mention that there will be no Major Character Death in this fic. Don't let me deceive you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I fell in the ocean

When I knew I would drown

I didn't fight back

I sank deeper into the dark

The bottom I found

Regulus Black had not made many good decisions in his life. A few, certainly. He had helped Sirius escape from their family at Christmas 1975, even if his brother still didn't know about it. He had ended the relationship with James, when he had realised how much pain he was causing him. He had spared people, sometimes, when it was possible. He was not an inherently bad person. But neither was he a good one, no matter how favourably he was looked upon.

He hoped that this decision would make up for some of his mistakes. He didn't know how dangerous it would be, how much it would demand of him. But he was ready for it, he didn't want to be afraid anymore.

***

The cliffs of Moher were impressive, terrifying. They towered in the darkness, high waves lashing against them. Nevertheless, on closer

examination, you could make out the entrance to a cave among the furrowed, dark grey rocks. Regulus's destination.

He was glad Kreacher was with him, even if he looked as uncertain as Regulus felt. It was he who had put him on the trail, who knew what Voldemort was hiding there. That was why it felt right to bring him along.

After they entered the cave, Regulus first took a moment to dry them both off. On the way, a particularly high wave had caught them and the icy cold salt water began to draw the heat out of him. Then he created a ball of light that floated above him and Kreacher, accompanying them as they finally made their way into the cave.

He had to pay a toll of blood before he was allowed deeper in. Kreacher offered to take over, but Regulus talked him out of it. It was only a small cut, not worth mentioning. But he still couldn't deny the feeling of tightness in his chest as he smeared his blood over the rock where it glistened dark red in the fleeting light. A passage opened up in front of them. Regulus took a second before continuing his journey into the unknown. Kreacher followed him without hesitation.

A lake awaited them. Still and calm it lay there, the complete opposite of the storming sea on the other side of the rocks. But something about it sent a shiver down Regulus's spine.

The ball of light flew upwards, illuminating the cave a little, so far that Regulus could make out a small island in the middle of the lake, on which stood a sort of basin. Regulus let his gaze wander, but could see no bridge or path leading to it.

"Master Regulus." He felt Kreacher tug him by the sleeve. He had his other arm outstretched, pointing to the ground in front of them. Regulus followed the direction his finger pointed and recognised a chain leading into the water.

"What do you think is attached to it?" murmured Regulus, not really expecting an answer from Kreacher. A nervous voice inside him wanted to stop him from examining the sunken end of the chain, but he ignored it. He clutched at any straw that would save him from having to swim through that water.

With a wave of his wand, he set the chain in motion, watching as link after link came out of the water, eventually revealing a narrow boat that looked surprisingly dry and undamaged for having possibly been at the bottom of the lake for months. Regulus took heart and climbed

into the boat. Kreacher took a seat opposite him.

Silently they sailed across the black water while Regulus's gaze was fixed firmly on the island. He tried to spot potential dangers, hidden spells and shields that could be dangerous to him. But there was nothing of the sort. Only this stone basin, beautifully decorated, with contents as yet unknown. The cold light that Regulus's spell shone on it made it look ominous.

The boat docked and Regulus carefully stepped out. With cautious, slow steps he approached the basin, wand half raised, peering inside. A liquid floated in it, greyish black, not allowing a glimpse of the bottom. Next to it, on the massive rim, lay a small white bowl. Regulus looked at it silently, then at the water, then at the bowl again. A terrible premonition spread through him. This premonition was confirmed when he tried to reach into the liquid and failed miserably.

"Kreacher," Regulus croaked, a moment later. Tasted bile in his mouth.

"What is it, Master Regulus?"

"I need you to help me with something now."

***

Regulus couldn't think of anything worse than drinking an unknown liquid created by Voldemort to protect a part of his soul. But he knew it was the only way. And he was at least quite sure that it would not kill him outright. But that was the only certainty he had. Everything else, the worst tortures, the most horrible ordeals, were within the realm of possibility, were even probable.

He explained to Kreacher what he had to do. What he absolutely could not stop doing, no matter how much Regulus wanted him to. Kreacher looked unhappy, frightened, but he didn't argue. Climbed wordlessly onto the basin, his gaze fixed on Regulus, waiting. He grasped the bowl with trembling fingers, holding it just a few inches above the surface of the liquid. Took one deep breath, tried to calm his pounding heartbeat, to drown the doubts. He had planned this for weeks. He had made up his mind. He couldn't back out now.

The bowl dipped smoothly into the water, filling to the brim with the

grey liquid. Regulus lifted it again, trying to suppress his trembling at least enough not to spill any. He had to do this now.

Before he could change his mind, he lifted it to his lips and drank. Didn't think about the grossly bitter taste, drank until the bowl was empty. Then he immediately dipped it again, filled it up, drank it empty again. So far so -

The pain hit him so hard that he almost collapsed on the spot. The bowl slammed down on the basin, his stomach seemed to turn, knotted, the pain pulled into his guts, made him double over, grit his teeth.

Kreacher was quick. He picked up the bowl and dipped it again. It could already be seen that the liquid in the basin was getting less, but there was still far too much in the bowl. He held the bowl out to Regulus, who took it, trembling violently, and emptied it in one go. A new pain shot through him, so intense that for a moment everything blurred before his eyes. He managed to stay conscious, somehow.

Kreacher held the next load out to him, he tried to grab it, but his fingers were shaking too violently. He stood bent low, his knees soft, about to give way. He told Kreacher to pour him the liquid, even though everything in him was already resisting. Kreacher reluctantly obeyed and a flash of pain later Regulus sank to the ground, trembling wildly.

Again he saw that bowl in front of him. He couldn't drink any more, he needed a break. Pain was clouding his senses. He began to see things that weren't there.

"Kreacher," he croaked, his voice threatening to fail. "I can't go on."

Kreacher shook his head. "Master Regulus must drink. He said it himself."

Regulus swallowed with difficulty. His throat was dry as dust. He tried to think, tried to think of what was important.

You have a job to do. You're the only one who can stop him.

And he drank.

"You're not making this any easier for me, Sirius."

"Excuse me? What's that supposed to mean?"

"When you're here, Mother and Father are always on edge. They take it out on me and put pressure on me. I'm not up for it."

"And what are you trying to tell me now? That I should leave?"

"No, I just want you to get your shit together. I know you don't want to be around our family, I know you don't want to take responsibility. But then at least let me clean up your mess in peace."

"You've become such a mummy's boy Reg, you never would have said anything like that before. It's almost sad to watch."

"Oh, shut up! You're the pathetic one. Hanging out with mudbloods and blood traitors. Defiling what our family has built over centuries. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"Ha. Wow... Get out of my room, Regulus. We're done."

"Sirius, ..."

"ARE YOU HARD OF HEARING, YOU BASTARD?"

Regulus curled up on the floor. He didn't want to go on. This wasn't the same pain as the Cruciatus curse. It burned into his mind, showed him his greatest mistakes, his greatest regrets. The worst kind of torture.

Kreacher straightened him, desperate. "Master Regulus, not much more, not much more! Please, drink, it will be done in a moment."

Weakly, Regulus opened his mouth, allowed the liquid to flow into him, swallowed. And then he screamed.

"Reg, look at me..." James sounded so desperate. "Look at me and tell me this isn't what it looks like."

Regulus stared at the floor, his hand on his sleeve, pulling it down so tightly that the fabric almost tore.

"Please tell me this isn't-," James's voice broke. He began to pace up and down, hands to his face. Regulus could hear him struggling to keep his composure.

"I warned you...," Regulus replied weakly. Had played the conversation out in his mind so many times, had seen it coming for so long. And yet it was many times more painful than he had feared. He felt like he was about to suffocate.

"Of what?!", James wheeled around to face him, so violently that it made Regulus lift his eyes for a second, looking James in the eyes. He was crying.

"That you can't save me. I made up my mind a long time ago."

James clenched his fists, ruffled his hair. A choked sob escaped his throat and Regulus felt something dying inside him.

"What are you saying? What are you talking about? This isn't you. You're... you're not a..."

"Death Eater?" Regulus felt his eyes begin to sting as well. But he would not allow the tears, not when this was his chance to end this farce once and for all.

"Wake up James. We are not children anymore. We are at war. And I've chosen my side."

James hid his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Regulus had seen him like this a few times before. He was on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Reg please, don't do this... don't do this to me. I can't be without you."

Realising Regulus wasn't going to answer him, James put his hands down, his face red, his cheeks wet. He had pressed his lips together.

"I tried everything, I... I'm sorry I wasn't enough." He took a step towards Regulus, but Regulus backed away. That made James pause, lower his arms as if all air had suddenly gone out of him. His eyes began to stare into emptiness. Tears dripped from his chin onto his uniform. Regulus knew he would never forget the sight.

"Please," he said, again and again. Broken, empty. Regulus had done this to

him. Regulus had taken away everything, his seemingly inextinguishable inner light. It was simply gone. Regulus was a monster.

"I'm going to leave now. Don't follow me."

Regulus didn't wait for a reply, trudging past James towards the door. This would be the last time here. All that would be left behind would be a thousand memories. Futile hopes. And regrets.

"Don't go." James's voice sounded alien. The words pulled at him, but he did not stop. He left the Room of Requirements, left James, left the only person he had ever felt safe with.

The tears came as soon as the door slammed shut.

"Master Regulus must stay awake!" Kreacher's desperate voice reached his ear, brought him out of his personal hell. "The last sip. It's the last one. One more time!"

Regulus could say nothing, barely move. He no longer knew where he was, barely knew his own name. Why was James here? What had he been doing here? And Sirius...

"Master, drink!"

He felt the bowl against his lips. Saw Kreacher's pleading look, heard his relentless begging. And he drank one last time.

This time it was different. The intense pain and hallucinations stopped, cold, painful clarity returned. Regulus groaned and tried to move. His limbs seemed to weigh a ton.

"Master did it!" shouted Kreacher, climbing back onto the basin, retrieving a medallion from it. Regulus was only peripherally aware of what he was doing. He was so thirsty. And with each passing second, the feeling became more unbearable.

"Kreacher," he gasped, pointing to the lake. "I need water." He didn't care that the lake was scary, that he didn't know what kind of water it was. But he felt like he was going to die if he didn't get something to drink right now.

Kreacher lost no time. Clutching the bowl, he hurried to the shore,

submerged the bowl. Regulus closed his eyes. He was so exhausted.

"AH!" screeched Kreacher loud enough to snap Regulus out of his trance. He saw the house-elf stumble back, throw the bowl away and rush towards Regulus. Behind him, hands came out of the water, grey, foul corpse hands. Something deep inside Regulus cried out.

"Master! We have to get away! Now!!!" Regulus had never seen Kreacher so beside himself. He grabbed him roughly by the arm, trying to pull him upright, but to no avail. Regulus was too weak to support him, to break free of the uncomfortable stones digging into his back.

"We must get to the boat, the Inferi are coming!"

Infe...ri. Regulus watched the monsters scramble to shore, dozens of them, from all sides. The screaming inside him grew louder, reached his ears. He held his breath as the sudden realisation hit him.

This was it.

"Get out of here," Regulus croaked as loud as he could. "Take the medallion and get out! Find a way to destroy it!"

"No, Kreacher is not leaving Master Regulus behind!" Kreacher tugged at him, turning his head repeatedly to the Inferi, who were coming closer, far too quickly.

"Get out of here! That's an order," Regulus shouted, mustering all his strength and shoving Kreacher away from him. If only he were stronger...

The first hand grabbed him. Then the second, third, fourth. Damp cold spread from them, paralysing Regulus, nipping any attempt at defence in the bud. He felt himself being dragged across the stone, his skin tearing open, and cried out in pain. The grimace of an Inferi appeared above his face, snarling at him, making his insides shudder. He was doomed.

He caught sight of Kreacher one last time, climbing straight into the boat, on his way to safety. He had turned towards him, tears in his eyes, his mouth open in a silent cry. It reassured Regulus to know that at least he was safe.

The water was freezing. They dragged him in, pushed his head under water, clutched him from all sides, made themselves heavy. He could

hardly move.

It was deep. Regulus sank down, the air in his lungs began to press. The adrenaline in his body made him make a few last desperate attempts to shake off the monsters, but it was futile. Desperately he stretched his head upwards, saw the lone light of his spell through the surface, saw it getting smaller and smaller.

His respiratory tract began to spasm. Everything began to spin, everything hurt, everything....

So that was the end of him. How pathetic.

The great Regulus Black, heir to the greatest wizarding family of all time, drowned by Inferi. It showed once again that there was nothing great about him, nothing significant. If people ever talked about him, ever learned how he had ended, they would laugh at him, surely give him some derisive epithet.

Regulus the Failure, perhaps.

Regulus the Forlorn.

Regulus the Liar.

No.

No more of that.

Who cares what anyone says?

Who are you really? Who do you want to be?

"I love you."

James didn't look at him when he said the words, just lay next to him in the grass, his face turned skywards.

It was the first time anyone had ever said that to him.

But Regulus didn't allow happiness, didn't even know how. He just snorted bitterly, biting his lower lip and blinking away the burning in his eyes.

"And this, James," he said in a strained voice, "is your greatest weakness."

"No," James replied, quietly, with a confidence that was unparalleled. He grabbed Regulus's hand, holding it tightly.

"It's my greatest pride."

Regulus the Beloved.

That's who I want to be.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Into The Dark' by Between Mountains

Words are hard…

See ya

Chapter 30: Kryptonite

Chapter Notes

CW Grief, Mental Distress

Since this chapter is so short, I decided to upload the next one right along ;) Hope you like them! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You call me strong

You call me weak

But still your secrets I will keep

It was a good morning, one without fear. Although the familiar panic was brewing in Sirius when he woke up, before it could spread through his chest, he already felt the warmth next to him, heard the soft snoring. Remus was there. He was fine. Sirius allowed himself to breathe deeply. It had become a morning ritual.

Sirius turned to Remus, who still seemed to be sound asleep. His eyebrows were gently drawn together, his mouth open. He only looked this peaceful now when he was asleep. When there weren't a thousand thoughts racing through his head, when he wasn't in pain. Sirius knew that he was suffering, though not from what. And it made him sad that Remus didn't trust him enough to tell him.

Carefully, he touched Remus's face, stroked his cheek, ran a feather-light hand over his short hair. Another mystery, just like all the new scars on his back. An 'unpleasant run-in with Greyback's lapdogs' or something, Sirius didn't even remember what Remus had told him. It had been a lie, that at least was clear. But Sirius hadn't said anything, as he so often didn't. He had chosen to put up with it, with everything that raged behind Remus's troubled eyes but which he never addressed. It created a rift between them that would probably grow and grow, eventually dragging them down with it. But for now, it was

okay. It was better than arguing. Sirius just didn't have the strength for that.

He let go of Remus and turned back onto his back, stretching extensively. His body cracked loudly, pulling in a few places, complaining loudly about the previous night. Sirius studiously ignored it, closing his eyes, soaking up the silence. It was peaceful.

He dozed for a while longer, until finally a sideways glance at the clock told him it was past noon. Remus was still sleeping like a rock. What had become of the early riser? Smiling quietly to himself, he finally got up first and decided to rub that in Remus's face later.

After he finished in the bathroom, he went downstairs, made himself some tea, sat down at the dining room table with one of his music magazines. In it he found an interview with the newcomers Van Halen, who had already announced their second album, and admired Eddie's guitar and perm. Would they start touring soon? Remus would certainly like to go too. A good idea for their next Muggle date.

The creaking stairs gave Remus's arrival away early. Sirius didn't let on that he was aware of his presence, waiting until Remus was behind him, putting his arms around him and murmuring a soft "Morning" against his neck.

"Oh, alive again?" grinned Sirius then, nudging Remus lightly with his head.

"Mmm," was all he did, taking a moment before letting Sirius out of his grasp and plopping down in the chair beside him. He looked completely drained, his eyes small and glued shut, his cheeks flushed.

"I never thought I'd live to see the day you beat me at sleeping late," Sirius said cheerfully, watching Remus's reaction closely. Was everything alright with him?

Remus rubbed his eyes and shrugged. "Took me a while to fall asleep." That was all he said. Sirius sighed inwardly. Swallowing his questions, he put on a smile.

"I see."

He watched Remus stare motionless at the table, not knowing if it was sleep drunkenness or something else. He slammed his magazine shut.

"So you want some coffee or tea?" he offered.

"Coffee, please," Remus muttered without looking up. Sirius nodded and went into the kitchen. He put the coffee on, got a cup from the cupboard and, leaning against the counter, listened to the machine at work. Should he check again? Clearly something was wrong, even more so than yesterday. Sirius could hardly bear to see him like this. But he also didn't want to be too pushy, or annoy him. That would be even worse than this overloaded silence.

Sirius was jolted out of his thoughts when he heard a knock on the window. He lifted his head, saw a fat, black owl banging impatiently against the glass with its short beak. Irritated, Sirius went to the window and opened it. The owl had a Daily Prophet clamped in its talons, but a far thinner edition than normal.

"That late?" muttered Sirius, frowning, hastily gathering a few coins and paying the owl, who instantly disappeared again. Sirius unfolded the newspaper, read the large headline:

Special edition

The War with Voldemort. Current developments.

Sirius skimmed the front page, but there wasn't too much news for him. Things were looking bad, blah blah, Ministry staff had disappeared again or were suspected of falling victim to the Imperius Curse. It was depressing shit, but Sirius was already so jaded after barely a year in the Order that it made little impression on him. Bad enough.

He kept turning the pages, already on his way to the bin, when he finally spotted a small, easily overlooked news item at the very bottom of the last page. It was only one paragraph, only two sentences.

Shortly before the editorial deadline, we received the news that Regulus Black, heir to the Black family and suspected Death Eater, has died last night. Read the full details in tomorrow morning's edition.

Sirius abruptly let go of the paper as if he had burned himself on it. It sailed to the floor, right next to the rubbish, stayed there unsuspecting. The coffee machine began to beep.

***

If I go crazy

Will you still call me superman?

It was the afternoon of November 4, 1979 when James lost his mind.

On the phone, receiver in hand, Sirius's voice at his ear. Just a few words, hesitant, almost incidental. And yet that was all it took.

"I just wanted to let you know, Prongs... so you won't be surprised if you don't hear from me for the next few days. It's about Reg... he died last night. I don't know how it..."

James hung up.

"James? James, are you in there?"

Lily's voice sounded concerned. James didn't answer. He didn't know how to speak, how words worked. He was empty.

Regulus was dead.

"James, please open the door. I'm worried."

Regulus had died at only 18 years old.

His birthday had only been a few weeks ago. James had been thinking about him all day, had even considered writing to him, despite his last letter being so outrageously short....

Why had he torn up the letter?

"James. I'm coming in now." A soft click, then the door swung open into the guest room. James's vision was blurry, he'd flung his glasses against the wall at some point. He saw Lily's face slowly sharpen as she knelt in front of him and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"What happened? James?" Her words were insistent. But they had little chance of getting through to him.

Why Regulus?

Why not him?

"You're scaring me, James. Please talk to me." Lily's voice sounded tearful.

James had killed him. He had killed him because he hadn't stopped him. Because he had let him go, back in the Room of Requirements, after he had discovered the dark mark. Because he had stopped fighting, because he had thrown himself into Lily's arms instead of standing by him. It was his fault.

It was this sudden certainty that brought him out of his apathy. Feeling returned to his limbs, emotions crashing down on him with full force as if a dam had broken. Dangerous.

"Do you want me to take you to a doctor?" James shook his head, pushing her hand off his shoulder. His body began to tremble. It wouldn't be long now, then he would....

"Go, please," he managed to say. *Go right now, or you'll see the real me.*

"No," Lily said softly but firmly. "There's no way I'm leaving you alone right now."

"Go..."

"Who were you talking to on the phone earlier? Has something happened? Is Sirius all right? Remus, Mary, Peter?"

James shook his head, feeling tightness building in his chest.

"They're fine."

Lily breathed a sigh of relief, leaning in further but not touching him. Presumably she suspected he would explode if she did.

"But what is it then? Maybe I can help?"

Tears welled up in his eyes at that very moment.

"No, you can't," he whispered wanly. *Please go away before I tell you the truth and lose you too.*

"But at least I can listen to you. You need to talk about this, James."

Tears spilling over, James couldn't stop them. He held a hand to his eyes, trying to hide them from Lily. A violent sob shook him, made his whole body shake. There it was, the breakdown. The real James Potter, ugly, broken. Helpless.

"Lily," he sobbed. He couldn't take it anymore, the loneliness, her pitying gaze, everything he felt. He fell into her arms, buried himself, clung to her like a drowning man. She held him, kept him alive.

"He's dead!"

Saying it hurt so fucking bad. He could hardly breathe. He wanted it to stop.

"Who, darling? Who's dead?" Her voice sounded so impossibly soft.

How could he ever put this into words? What words could even begin to describe what he was feeling? Saying his name wasn't enough. It didn't capture it. The tragedy that Regulus was gone and no one would ever know who he really was.

Nobody ever gave him a chance.

“Someone I loved very much,” he breathed weakly.

Someone I loved more than anything. Someone I didn't love enough. Someone I can never love again.

Lily just held him tight.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Kryptonite' by 3 Doors Down (I don’t know why, I associate this song so much with James)

Petition to hug James and Sirius.

Chapter 31: Coward

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You're willing to die you coward, but not to live!

Hell, but living is what you're supposed to do!

12 hours earlier

A worried friend, a smeared map, too much boredom after a full moon night in Grimmauld Place. Those three things saved Regulus Black's life. And nearly cost Remus his.

Barty Crouch had made Remus stay after his awakening, not return to Sirius immediately. His own gut had pulled him back into Regulus's study, had made him search the pile of messy sheets. Had dropped a map into his hand with jumbled stuff scrawled on it. And, somewhere on the Irish coast, in one of the countless boxes of the UTM grid, Remus had seen the red circle, around the coordinate 29U 4713 5869, and the lone word '*medallion*'.

And now, only a few minutes later, he was in said place, smearing his blood on some cave wall. Running through dark, narrow corridors, hearing screaming, inhuman, painful screaming. What the hell was going on?

The first thing Remus saw when he entered the cave was Kreacher, huddled together, on a small boat. There was a lake, flickering light above them, indefinable movement at the other end of the room. Remus was completely overwhelmed.

"Kreacher?" he called, closing his eyes briefly so as not to let the flickering light throw him off. "What's going on here? Where's Regulus?"

Kreacher let out a pained howl, pointing to the black water, near a small central island on which stood some kind of pillar. But there was something else, barely visible. Movement, creatures writhing, crawling into the water, huddling around something.

"Kreacher, what's going on?" yelled Remus again, reaching his wand towards the cave ceiling. "Lumos Maxima!" The light in the cave grew brighter, steadier. Made him see more clearly what was going on in the middle island. His heart stopped for a moment.

"Inferi," he breathed, and Kreacher howled again at the word.

"They...they-h-have M-Master Regu-." He could barely speak through his sobs. Remus stared at the surface of the water, where the Inferi were cavorting. He saw bubbles rising, his eyes widening.

This was where the third aspect, his boredom, came in, back after one of his dreadful full moon nights in Grimmauld Place. He knew what Inferi were. He had read about them, in one of the Black family's hundred-year-old books. They came only two chapters after the werewolves.

"Get out of the boat," Remus shouted, already jumping in himself. Kreacher wanted to retort something, but Remus grabbed him unceremoniously and threw him to the safe shore. Every second counted.

The boat was magical, it started moving by itself when he sat down. But it was far too slow, far too sluggish. He would never get to Regulus in time like this.

He rose, staring at the Inferi, who seemed to ignore him and the boat completely. There were countless of them, one more vile and deadly than the other. Of course Regulus had been unable to do anything against them, they were invincible. If one didn't know their weakness.

Remus hated fire. Hated the destruction, the heat, the pain. But luckily the Inferi hated it too.

He allowed himself one last shaky breath before he began to summon it. He had never done this before, not on this scale, but he didn't have time to think about it now either. He pointed his wand at the Inferi remaining on the surface and shouted, "INCENDIO!"

It worked. They screeched wildly as they scattered in the face of the flames, some of them on the island being hit head-on and going down

to the ground where they writhed wildly and finally lay motionless. It was a start. But it was not enough.

He kept going, summoning the next flames, even bigger than the previous ones. The closer he got to the island, the more effect it had. Still, it was not enough. The Inferi fled, jumping into the water, deep enough to escape him. Right where Regulus was. How was he supposed to reach him?

Heart pounding wildly, he stared at the unnaturally still water. He knew that magic fire could work under water, at least if it was strong enough. But it required a great deal of power. Perhaps more than Remus had.

With trembling fingers, he clutched the wand, pointed it at the lake. It was perhaps his last chance.

"Come on," he muttered, muttering the spell. The flames entered the water, staying brightly lit so Remus could trace their path. They didn't go deep.

"Shit!" He repeated the spell, vigorously. This time he caught a single Inferi, maybe two metres below the surface. It was still not enough.

"Now get a move on!" he shouted. He didn't know who exactly he was shouting at, if it was the water, the Inferi, or his own weakness. But he had to give vent to all this. His uncharacteristic turmoil, the shattering realisation that maybe it was already too late.

Against his will, in this very moment, Sirius came to his mind.

I'm sorry, he thought, *again I'm causing you grief.*

Suddenly, his wand quivered. For a moment, the cave seemed as bright as day as a huge ray of flames burst out of the tip of it, danced across the surface of the lake, fanning out into countless small vortexes, submerging moments later. Like fireworks, Remus watched as they shot luminously downwards, searching for their targets. A few metres down, they came to a huge tangle of bodies that made Remus' breath catch.

Half a dozen of the flames landed there, blasting the pile apart so that Remus saw the individual bodies light up for a short time. One of them was much taller, thinner, more human than the rest. He didn't move.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Remus grabbed his forehead with one hand. Had he gotten all the Inferi? How many others were still lurking?

Was there a spell that could pull someone out of the water?

He's dying!

He couldn't remember!

He's dying!

Erratically, Remus threw off his cloak, tore his shoes off his feet, stepped with one foot onto the side of the boat. He couldn't do that, could he? It was suicide.

He's dying.

Remus jumped. Dived in, into unnatural, dangerous blackness.

The water was icy cold, squeezing the air from Remus's lungs, making him lose his orientation for a moment. But then he pulled himself together, conjured a film on his eyes and a light at the tip of his wand, and began to dive down. Nothing attacked him.

After a few metres of depth, the pressure on his ears became uncomfortable. He swallowed several times, but the compensation worked only mildly. This lake was far too deep.

He swam to where he had seen the human outline, but there was no one there. He had to go even deeper, until the pressure on his ears seemed unbearable, until his lungs began to protest. But then he saw him, slightly illuminated by the light of his wand, pale as death.

Remus grabbed him under the arm, pointed his wand upwards and tried to shout "*Ascendio*!" but nothing more than a few indefinable bubbles of air came out of his mouth. They served their purpose nonetheless, as if caught in a powerful updraft, they pushed upwards to the surface of the water and slammed down hard on the slippery rocks of the middle island. Remus's back cried out loudly, but he ignored it, taking a deep breath.

"Oh shit," he whispered shakily. *I really just did that.*

Hastily, he straightened up, looking at the motionless body beside him, which seemed completely alien in an eerie way.

As if dead.

All relief drained from him as the words echoed in his head. Remus came to his knees, bent over Regulus, over his chalky white face and slightly open mouth. He put his ear to Regulus's chest, his hand over his mouth, and waited. And waited. There was nothing.

"Fuck, Regulus, cut the bullshit." Hastily, he straightened up again and felt frightening emptiness in his mind.

Feverishly, Remus ripped open Regulus's soaking wet shirt and pressed his palms to his sternum. How did you actually revive someone? How did that work again? How deep, what rhythm? Why the hell didn't he know that?

He started moving, began chest compressions, hopefully fast enough, hopefully deep enough. He watched as Regulus's limp head bobbed along, seeming to mock him, scold him for his incompetence. He carried on regardless.

It was exhausting, terribly exhausting. After only two minutes Remus was sweating, his arms and back ached and he felt desperation building up inside him.

He shook out his arms, bent over Regulus's face, held his nostrils shut and blew air into his mouth. Was that doing any good at all? Surely his lungs were full of...?

Remus paused. He grabbed his wand and pointed it at Regulus's neck.

"Spiritum Duc," he whispered. Nothing happened. Desperate, he put the wand away again, continued with the revival. He couldn't do it, it was useless, he had failed....

After the fourth press, it happened. Regulus shot upwards, as if pulled by a rope. A great gush of water shot out of his mouth, partly landing on his legs. Choking gasps of air, hysterical coughing. Remus slumped down. Oh, God. Oh, thank God.

Regulus doubled over, his torso falling back to the floor, his face contorted in pain.

"Regulus," Remus whispered, "Can you hear me?"

Regulus nodded, his eyes closed. He was breathing deeply, gurgling, shaken again and again by coughs. He was alive.

"It'll be all right, Kreacher and I will bring you-"

An ice-cold claw grasped Remus by the ankle and pulled at him with such inhuman strength that it flung him to the ground. He cried out, looked to his legs, recognised a dark grimace with bared teeth. The Inferi pulled at him relentlessly, unimpressed by the kicks he gave him with his other foot. A second Inferi emerged from the dark water, bent low, grabbing Remus faster than he could react.

"Shit!" Wildly, he looked around for his wand, which lay out of reach next to Regulus's head.

"Reg!" he shouted, groaning as the Inferi dragged him over the sharp stones. Regulus was slow to respond, raising his head a few inches, opening his eyes a crack.

"Reg! My wand!" he yelled, trying to claw at it with his hands where he could, but kept slipping on the wet stones.

Regulus's eyes snapped open, bloodshot. He tried to sit up, but he was too weak.

"He's to the left of your head!" The water came closer. This couldn't be happening now. Not after he had just saved Regulus.

Regulus groped blindly beside him, found the wand, grasped it.

"Fire!" yelled Remus, suddenly afraid that Regulus might throw the wand and miss. "Shoot it at them!"

Regulus pressed the wand to his chest frantically, coughing in agony. Then, fingers quivering, he raised it and muttered the redeeming word. It was a pathetic fire, barely getting a few feet, but it served its purpose. The Inferi scattered, let go of Remus's legs and he escaped. Ignoring the throbbing pain in his body, he scrambled to his feet and rushed back to Regulus, receiving his wand and taking out the Inferi before they could grab him again.

Regulus looked completely out of it. He probably thought it was all a dream. Fortunately, he had reacted anyway. Remus sank down beside him, grasping his arm.

"You'll be safe in a moment. We'll get you to the hospital."

"No," Regulus muttered, his voice raspy. His bloodshot eyes made him look sinister.

"What, why not?" Remus looked at him, uncomprehending. "You were

almost dead. Someone needs to look after you."

Regulus shook his head. "I'm fine... Take me somewhere... where we're alone."

"You're talking crazy. If you won't go to the hospital, at least let Narcissa come to Grimmauld Place."

"No!" Regulus's voice rolled over. "I can't go back...take me somewhere else. I'll explain...then."

This was a very bad idea. A disastrous idea.

But then, what else about that night hadn't been disastrous?

***

Because he couldn't think of anything better, he took Regulus to his small, secluded werewolf hut. Despite months of absence, he found everything there as it had always been. The fireplace always filled with dry hardwood, the soft couch, the small wet room with the bandages. He gently laid Regulus on the couch, took off his soaking wet and ruined clothes and dried him with a towel. Regulus was awake, but still so weak that he could barely give Remus a hand with it.

"Thank you," he just kept muttering, even as Remus changed him into his own change of clothes deposited in the hut. They were far too big for him, but at least they were dry. Combined with the rapidly growing fire in the fireplace, it helped to bring Regulus's shivering under control after only a few minutes.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to hospital? I'm worried about your lungs," Remus said as he changed himself. Regulus, covered up to the neck with a woollen blanket by Kreacher, shook his head.

"I am," he cleared his throat, "I can treat myself. I just need some things from my study. You'll have to get them for me."

"Why don't we all just go back? What's the point of that? Barty is worried sick."

Regulus sighed deeply. "Listen, this probably sounds weird to you now... but this could be an opportunity. I believe it's best if everyone thinks I'm still in the cave for now. At the bottom of the lake. Dead."

Remus, his arms already tucked into the sleeves of his pullover, paused. "Excuse me?"

"I can't tell you the details yet. But I'm on to something really big. And if I go off the radar for this for now, my chances of success are probably greater."

"What kind of thing?" Remus pulled his shirt over his head and approached Regulus. "What were you doing in that cave anyway? And what's that medaillon Kreacher is carrying around?"

"It's a top secret mission. I'm looking for... items, such as the medallion. They hold powerful magic. I want to destroy them before they can become... dangerous for us. But no one must know of this, not even the Dark Lord."

It all sounded very suspicious to Remus. But Regulus was glaring at him so determinedly that he kept his remarks to himself.

"And so that you can do this better, you want everyone to think you're dead..."

Regulus nodded impatiently. "When I'm relieved of my Death Eater duties and no one has to worry about me anymore, I'll be freer. And the people who might be protecting the items won't know who they're dealing with."

Remus looked at Regulus, frowning. "Don't you want to carry out your duties as a Death Eater anymore?"

"Of course I do! You know that", Regulus retorted immediately. "I'm doing this to *help* the Dark Lord. But it's... I feel like I can help him the most, when I'm doing it undercover."

Remus hesitated.

"Please, Remus. You have to trust me on this one."

"...If you say so." He didn't like that. At all. But after all the problems Regulus has helped him with...

"Thank you. You won't regret it." Regulus rubbed his eyes. "But I hope

you know what that means. No one, and I mean no one can know I'm alive. Not Voldemort, not Barty, not even Sirius."

It was only when the last name was mentioned that Remus realised the extent of the plan.

"But you do know what you're doing to those people, don't you? They'll mourn you."

Regulus eased off his eyes, throwing Remus a mocking smile.

"Who's going to miss me?" He snorted contemptuously. "My mother? She thinks I'm a failure anyway. I haven't seen my father in years and the last thing my brother said to me was to go to hell. He'll be pleased to hear that I've complied with his wishes."

Anything Remus wanted to say in reply, Regulus would not want to hear. So he remained silent.

"So then, could you go back to Grimmauld Place and tell them that you couldn't save me? Would you do that? Otherwise I'll tell Kreacher to..."

"No, I'll do it." Remus didn't trust the house-elf to lie so convincingly. "Would you like me to bring you your shit while I'm at it then?"

Regulus nodded gratefully. "Yes, please. At least the one from the study. There's a magically enlarged bag, you can put anything in there. Take everything you find. It won't be noticed. No one uses that room but me."

Remus nodded and turned to leave. If he hurried, he might even make it back to Sirius before sunrise.

"Thank you, Remus. For everything," Regulus repeated sternly, making Remus pause at the doorstep. "I won't forget this."

"I hope so," Remus said grimly. Then he set off.

***

Barty's reaction was intense, more intense than Remus had expected. He didn't ask what had happened, he didn't say anything. Just stopped on the landing, gripping the banister tightly. Looked at Remus,

deathly pale, with dark, dull eyes. Remus felt a chill go down his spine.

"Do you know where his parents are? I want to tell them too."

Barty didn't answer. There was an eerie silence between them for a few seconds, then Barty turned around. With heavy, definitive steps he strode up the stairs, not turning back to Remus, not letting on whether he had heard him. Remus looked at him until he had disappeared from his field of vision. A moment later, Remus heard a door close.

For a moment he considered going after him. Then he turned to the house elf who stood quietly at his side.

"Kreacher, can you go check on him? Take care of him if he needs anything. I don't think he wants comfort from me."

Kreacher nodded. "Kreacher believes Revered Masters Walburga and Orion are not to be found at the moment. I will spread the word as quickly as possible. Please take care of Master Regulus."

"Thank you. Will do." He took one last look up the stairs.

Was this really such a good idea?

***

"Are you sure you don't want to tell Barty? He seemed very upset."

Regulus fished in his bag with his hands and nodded, lost in thought. Only when he found what he was looking for, a small vial filled with translucent liquid, did he answer.

"With Barty, what's important to me is that he can stay in the house even when I'm gone. That he doesn't have to go back to his shitty father. But I'm sure Kreacher will get that sorted. About the rest" Regulus waved the vial slightly, his gaze fixed on it. "He'll get over it." A fake smile. "I don't think I meant that much to him after all."

Remus didn't comment. In moments like these, Regulus reminded him far too much of Sirius.

Regulus loosened the cap from the vial and emptied it in one go.

Disgusted, he grimaced.

"You can go back now if you want. I can manage here on my own."

As if on cue, Remus yawned. He was completely exhausted. "I'll come by again tomorrow. I'll bring you some proper food then. Until then, you should be fine here with the supplies."

Regulus nodded. "Is that all right with you if I stay here for the time being?"

"Sure, the hut is only for full moons anyway. Set it up the way you need it. No one can track you here."

"Sounds good to me. Thanks, Remus."

Remus shrugged, too tired for big talk. "I'll see you tonight then. Take care of yourself."

"Always," Regulus said, half in thought. His eyes scanned the inside of the hut, inwardly already seeming to be rearranging it. Remus was fine with that. He raised his hand in farewell and left the hut, closing the door firmly behind him. It was dawn.

Maybe he was lucky. Maybe Sirius really was still asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Steppenwolf' by Hermann Hesse (Great book! Great quotes! Had to put the book into the fic, I'm sorry.)

Btw I just finished writing chapter 63... four chapters to go... if those chapters are as hard to write as chapters 60-63 though, they might kill me in the process lol.

See ya fellas! ;))

Chapter 32: Savior

Chapter Notes

CW Grief

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That's when she said,

"I don't hate you, boy.

I just want to save you

while there's still something left to save."

Lily Potter didn't mind waiting. As a child she had learned to wait, every time Petunia had claimed her toys for herself or had burst into one of her angry tirades. She had let her play, had let her rage. It had been okay, Lily had known that Petunia was often sad, often lonely, that she needed to take it out on someone. Lily hadn't minded having to put up with it, she loved her sister, despite everything. And most of the time it hadn't taken much more than a little patience anyway.

And so she waited for James too. Day after day. Waited until he ate, until he drank, until exhaustion overwhelmed him and he fell asleep. Waited days, eventually weeks. Tried to cover up her worry, her fear, tried to be there for him even though she still didn't know what was going on. Someone was dead. Someone who had been so important to James that he mourned at least as fiercely as he had his parents. Why didn't Lily know this person? Why had she missed out on such a fundamental part of James's life? Sometimes, and this was one of those times, James seemed incredibly estranged from her.

He wasn't silent about it forever. Perhaps it was due to her patience, her restraint, her caring. One morning, after a particularly restless night, just as Lily was coming out of the bathroom, James intercepted her, his sunken face determined.

"I have something to tell you," was all he said then. And Lily breathed a sigh of relief.

They sat down at the small kitchen table, a slightly too strong green tea in front of them, which they kept sipping. Lily felt tension bubbling up inside her, but she didn't let it show. She waited. Until finally James took off his new glasses, rubbed his red-rimmed eyes with one hand and sighed.

"I don't know where to start," he admitted.

Lily put her hand on his, stroking the back of his hand with her thumb. "Take all the time you need."

He gave her a pained look.

"Regulus Black," he said pressed, and the hand under Lily's clenched into a fist.

"What about him?"

"He's dead."

"Yes, I know, it was big in the news the other day."

James gave her a sideways glance, piercing, penetrating. Smiled ruefully.

Lily's eyes widened.

"James, what about him?"

James pulled his hand from the table, kneaded his fingers on his lap.

"You really want me to say it?"

"Yes."

James looked at the ceiling, for a moment. Then, chin still slightly tucked, he looked at her again. Firmly this time, certain.

"He was the one I loved." His gaze did not speak in the past tense. Lily found present, even future in it. So much love. Something stabbed her right in the heart.

"Oh, I see," she said, not knowing what else to say. What his words meant wouldn't quite sink in yet.

"It was before we were together," James said firmly. "It was only until Christmas during our last year at school."

The words hardly reassured her. Not when he spoke in that tone, when in doing so she saw a spark of life in his eyes for the first time in weeks.

"I tried to stop him... from doing all that Death Eater shit. But it just didn't work." Tears filled his eyes, but he blinked them away quickly. "He ended things. To become one of them."

Lily looked at the tabletop. Tried to remember that time, next to all the stress before final exams. James had been different, she'd noticed. But she had never been able to place it, had blamed it on some argument with Sirius, or the bad Quidditch season. Knowing it was because of... because of Regulus Black, the Death Eater, the Slytherin, the brother of....

"I never told anyone." Lily felt his gaze still on her. She couldn't return it.

"He didn't want me to. And I was afraid Sirius would hate me if he did."

He would definitely hate James. She knew Sirius well enough by now to know that anything involving his brother was a red flag. And if he knew that James had been involved with him....

Shit, it hurt. There was nothing she could do about it.

"But now that he's ... dead, I just need to talk to someone about it. I'm sorry, Lily, that I kept it from you."

"Don't be," Lily said, her voice sounding strange to her ears. "It was before our relationship. You don't owe me anything." So why did it feel so awful to think about? That there was - had been - someone in James's life that he had loved so painfully, so fiercely, that it made him cry himself to sleep for weeks on end?

Did James even love her that much? Would he grieve for her like that too? Or was she just...

Or was she only there because Regulus had left him?

She shook off the disgusting thoughts, the little voice that screeched loudly, *replacement!* almost making her cry. She was better than that.

At least she had to pretend for James.

James seemed to at least sense her inner struggle. Emphatically, he grabbed her hand, which still remained motionless in the same place.

"I don't want you to think anything wrong now, darling. I love you. More than anything else. I wouldn't be here without you." He squeezed her hand tightly. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Lily felt tears spring to her eyes. She pressed her lips together.

"But him..." James smiled and at that moment the first tears ran down his cheeks. "I loved him too. Very much."

Lily began to cry with him.

"And it kills me so much to know that he died because I couldn't stop him."

Lily shook her head, stood up and walked around the small table. Pushing away all her selfish thoughts, she hugged him tightly, letting her tears fall.

"None of this is your fault James."

James returned the hug, pressing Lily tightly against him.

"Yes it is." He sounded so sure that it almost made Lily wince.

***

Normally, Lily hated the Order meetings. A grim reminder of all the suffering and cruelty they were the centre of.

But this time, in the midst of all the dejection, barely three weeks after Regulus's death, she was almost glad to get out of the flat for something other than her shifts. Maybe it would clear her head, give her new thoughts.

But when they arrived at Elphias's secret safehouse, where they had been holding their meetings recently, she realised that she was only changing the colours of her worries. One look at the pale faces and at

the empty chairs in front of her was enough. It was frightening.

Alice approached her as soon as she had entered the darkened room. She smiled tentatively, but had her wand raised in warning.

"Hey," she whispered apologetically. "What was my toad's name at Hogwarts?"

"Edmond Dantès."

Alice giggled and lowered her wand. "I would have just let *the Count* apply too."

"Oh even after his death we still have to pay our respects," Lily said solemnly. "I'm still sorry he had to pass away like that, by the way. I told Emily so many times to be careful with the ornamental palm."

Alice sighed theatrically. "I still get chills when I think about it."

"Who doesn't?"

Lily nudged Alice with her elbow, earning a wry smile.

"Where did you leave James? Is he still sick?"

"Er yeah, exactly. Really bad flu, been completely flat for over two weeks. I think it's going to be a bit longer. But he's on the mend I think."

Alice looked at her sympathetically. "Oh, well, keep wishing him a speedy recovery! It must be quite a double burden for you. If you need any help, let me know."

"That's sweet, thank you." Lily tried a smile. "But I think I can manage."

At that moment Sirius entered the room behind her, so Lily kept her smile up and greeted him with a heartfelt hug after checking him. Had he always been this thin?

"Hey, it's good to see you," she said softly and let go of him again. His face resembled James's. His smile that of Lily's.

"Me too." He looked around, "James not with you today?"

"No, he's still sick. But getting better."

"Oh, damn. Tell him I said hi. I miss him."

Me too.

"Will do." She hesitated for a moment. "So how are you? I read about the Regulus thing in the paper..."

"Oh, it's all great," Sirius interrupted her with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Never liked him anyway. He chose his own fate."

Lily regarded him silently.

"Shall we sit down?" continued Sirius hurriedly, also waving a greeting to Alice. Lily made her way straight to the large square table in response, feeling sad for him.

"How's Remus doing? Is he okay too?" she asked him after they had all settled down.

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "Think so. He's been back on mission since the day before yesterday."

"Did he know how long it was going to be this time?"

"No." Sirius poked a crack in the wooden tabletop with his pinky. "At least he wouldn't say. That usually means it's going to be long."

"Oh, don't think about that. Maybe he'll be back in the next few days."

"Yeah, maybe."

Feverishly she searched for another topic of conversation. Alice, fortunately, came to her rescue.

"By the way, Frank and I are planning a little party in January. Would you like to come? James and Remus are invited too, of course."

"Sure!" Lily's enthusiasm wasn't fake this time.

"Won't be anything special, just something small. But we had so much fun at the wedding, we thought it would be good if we could get together a bit more regularly."

"Sounds really good," Sirius agreed thoughtfully.

"Great," Alice grinned and Lily admired her for her continued cheerfulness. "I'll let you know as soon as we have a date then. Maybe

we can find one when everyone is available."

"That sounds good." Lily hoped that things would be a little better by then. Because at the moment she couldn't think of anything more absurd than a party.

Peter and Mary arrived almost simultaneously, joining them at the table without much of a fractious greeting. Soon the rows filled up with the other members as well, though some chairs remained empty. Finally Moody limped past them, his new metal leg commenting on every contact with the ground with a little *klonk*. Lily saw out of the corner of her eye that Peter was staring at the leg as if mesmerised.

"So, anyone else coming?" asked Moody his standard question, to which Doge answered with his routine "No". Moody sat down heavily and looked around frowning. Besides Lily and her group, there were Sturgis, Daedalus, the Prewetts with their sister Molly and her husband Arthur, Dorcas, Emmeline and Benjy. That was all of them. And half of them looked like they weren't even here mentally. It didn't lift Lily's spirits.

"Well, let's get going." Moody brushed his feathery hair out of his face. "Any events from the last few shifts that haven't made it to me yet?"

"Yes, there was an attack near the Ministry yesterday and the day before. Managed to drive the Death Eaters off though, no casualties," Sturgis rattled off.

"Anything else?"

"Negative." No serious injuries, no deaths. That was the first time in weeks.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. let's get started on the regular points right away..." They talked about new routes, possible Death Eater targets, and meanwhile Elphias handed out the new shift schedules. Sirius beside her sighed softly as he examined his. Lily would have liked to join him.

"Wow, doesn't get any better, I guess," Alice muttered.

"No." The number of less dangerous shifts was shrinking dramatically. Were just hardly any places that were safe by now, either. Lily folded up the plan neatly, but would have preferred to tear it up.

"By the way, Dumbledore has also announced himself for January,"

Moody said. "He wants to support us more intensively from the new year on."

"Wow, big news," Sirius breathed so softly that only Lily understood. She snorted.

"We need to get back on our feet. In the last few weeks, we've only managed one effective strike against the Death Eaters." He cast a meaningful glance at Dorcas, but she didn't acknowledge his existence further. "We need an overarching strategy. Dumbledore will assist us with that. It will be time-consuming, but I am of good faith that we will then succeed in more counter-attacks of this kind. We haven't lost this war yet."

Lily didn't look around, but she could sense the bitterness in the air, the hopelessness. How was this going to go on? How much longer would they endure this?

Moody was still going on, losing himself in more lofty plans and intentions, but Lily wasn't really listening to him at all. She wanted to go home.

At some point he finished, asked for additions, more points. Nothing came. Then, with a heavy sigh, Moody finally rose and grabbed his walking stick.

"Cheer up," he grumbled. "Where's your pride?"

And with that he left.

Yes, where was their pride? Dead and buried with Marlene, Edgar and Cardoc? Leaked from their wounds, dried into the earth?

It was gone. And Lily doubted it would ever return.

No one in the circle said anything. Some just remained seated, their eyes fixed on the table. Others got up hurriedly, left the room. Lily joined the second group. She needed some fresh air.

Once outside on the small veranda, cold November air hit her and made her shiver. The safehouse was in the middle of nowhere, on the edge of the forest. One could only hear the muffled rustling of leaves through the protective screens, but nevertheless it had a calming effect on Lily.

Sirius appeared next to her and immediately lit a cigarette. Gradually

Mary, Peter and Alice trickled in to join them.

"Gotta go. Shift's about to start," Peter muttered subduedly, raising his hand in farewell.

"Take care," Mary murmured, watching Peter step out of the shield and disappear. Then she turned to Sirius. "Would you have one for me?"

Sirius nodded and held out the half-empty box to her.

"That was some funeral atmosphere in there," Mary snorted as she lit her cigarette.

"Probably won't get any better any time soon," Lily commented.

Alice took a step back as Mary and Sirius both blew smoke into the wind at the same time. "Probably won't. But we still have to keep at it. We can't just give up now. Who else is going to stop Voldemort?"

No one, Lily thought gloomily, but scolded herself for it in the next moment. She should take Alice as an example.

"You're right," she said therefore, partly because she noticed that Mary and Sirius looked down at the ground in dismay. "Think we're just having a bit of a low right now. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"I think so too. We can't give up hope."

Lily nodded to herself. After that, silence fell between them for a while and only the soft rustling of leaves could be heard.

"I'll have to be off then. I'm sure Frank will be back soon. Keep your head up," Alice said pointedly cheerfully. She turned to Lily. "Say hello to your husband for me," and then to Sirius. "And you tell your flatmate that he'd better come and see us when he gets back!"

"'Boyfriend," was all Sirius said, and then took a deep drag.

"Excuse me?"

"He's my boyfriend."

Alice paused in confusion. "Um... oh! You mean ...?"

"Yes." Sirius had lowered his eyes, continued to smoke incessantly.

"I see" There was an awkward silence for a moment, but Alice smiled it away bravely. "Then please tell your better half. He can happily get his lazy arse back here, missions or no missions!"

"Will do," Sirius said casually. He gave Alice a quick sideways glance and wrestled a thin smile from himself. "Say hello to Frank for me."

"Sure," Alice grinned and waved. "I'll see you next time."

"Hopefully it'll be a bit more cheerful then," Mary murmured, also raising her hand in farewell.

"For sure," Alice said optimistically and Lily envied her once more.

As soon as she had disapparated, a broad smile crept onto Lily's and Mary's faces. Lily nudged Sirius with her elbow and squeezed his hand affectionately.

"That went really well!" gloated Mary. "She took it super well."

"Wouldn't have expected anything else from Alice," Lily interjected.

Sirius's tension gave way to relief bit by bit. It made him look a lot more alive right away. "Yeah, really glad..." He bit his lower lip. "What do you think Frank will say when she tells him?"

Mary waved it off. "Oh, he won't care either. He's totally correct. And if he pulls any shenanigans, Alice'll take care of it."

"Hmm." Sirius didn't seem entirely convinced. Lily squeezed his hand emphatically and felt him return the gesture after a moment's hesitation. Their eyes met. A shy smile.

Ah, thought Lily mildly, *there you go Moody. Seems like I've got some pride in me after all.*

***

When Lily returned, she found James outside the bed. He was sitting in front of their new TV, watching something on BBC. Lily took that as a good sign. She took off her jacket and shoes and sat with him. She carefully felt her way forward, checking to see if he was open to touch, and finally, very gently, rested her head on his shoulder. He

then grabbed her hand and held it tightly. Lily closed her eyes, exhausted.

"Everyone sends you their love," she whispered, "Sirius misses you, Alice said she and Frank are planning a little party for January and invited us."

"Sounds good," was all she heard James say. At least he was saying anything at all.

They sat like that for a while, James looking fixated on the TV, Lily alternately watching and half dozing. He didn't ask about the meeting or the new shift schedule. Lily couldn't blame him. She didn't want to talk about it either, about the eight days of work in a row coming up next week, about the shifts outside the Ministry or at Nocturn Alley. It would only drag her down further.

After a couple of hours, she got up to make dinner. It felt good, kept her busy just enough to keep her mind from wandering off too much. She kept to shallow topics. Thought of maybe planning something for New Year's Eve, together with their friends. She glanced at the calendar, which she had rather neglected in the last few weeks. New Year's Eve was on a Monday this year....

She paused. A short moment passed. The kitchen clock ticked loudly, but the roaring in her ears was even louder. Her gaze flitted across November, which they had almost reached the end of. To the small red cross drawn over Friday in the first week. Realisation shot through her head like a bullet. She dropped the bowl in her hand, heard it land loudly clattering in the sink.

Wait.

When was the last time she'd had her period?

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Savior' by Rise Against (Rediscovered some 00s Rock while writing these chapters, some of the songs still fucking slap)

Finally Lilys PoV! Was looking forward to it. <3

So, now we're officially in the second half of the fic! Exciting!

There is so much to come.

See ya!

Chapter 33: Goliath

Chapter Notes

CW Problematic Drinking Behaviour

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In your eyes, night cold, I see the end of us

You're playing your best role but the mask shatters

Remus hardly recognised the hut when he paid Regulus the next visit at the end of November. He had magically enlarged it, even dividing it into several rooms: his cherished study, in the middle of which a cauldron bubbled and spread heavy fumes, the already familiar living room, where he had added a narrow bed near the fireplace, and a small bathroom.

"Looks quite cosy," Remus commented, setting his food bags down next to the small kitchenette.

Regulus, his hair slightly dishevelled and speckled with an indefinable blue liquid, shrugged.

"Well, had a bit of time."

Remus pointed at his hair. "You... have something there."

Regulus ran his hand through it and looked at his sullied fingers.

"Oh right. I dropped one too many leeches in the cauldron earlier. Blew right up."

Remus handed him a handkerchief, which Regulus hurriedly cleaned himself with. "How's it coming along?"

"Potions are going quite well. Didn't blow up your Dark Mark-concealment potion, thankfully, so you can take that with you." Regulus pointed towards the vials on his desk. "Unfortunately, Polyjuice Potion is always such a tedious process, it will take a while. But otherwise I've restored my supply quite well. I can work with

that."

"Good." Remus leaned against the kitchen counter. "And how's your obscure secret mission going?"

Regulus sighed. "Not that good. I've been brooding over how to destroy the medallion, but nothing seems to work. It's a tough one."

"And have you tracked down any other of these 'threats'?"

"Not really. The problem is you never really know what to look for. And I don't want to worry about that until I know how to break that shit."

"Is there... anything I can do to help?" asked Remus hesitantly. He didn't want to get too deeply involved in Regulus's shady business, his double life was complicated enough as it was.

Regulus fell silent, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on the ceiling. "Well, if you'd like, you could get me some books from the house library. That would make my research a lot easier."

"Sure," Remus said lightly. "Will you make me a list?"

Regulus looked at him gratefully. "Yes, thanks."

Remus pointed to the food he'd brought with him. "Hope that's enough for you until your Polyjuice Potion is ready. Haven't got time to come over next week."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Remus took a small, knotted plastic bag away from one of the bags on top. "You hungry? Brought some takeout..."

"Oh!" Regulus eyed him surprisedly. "Yeah, That's... that's great! Thank you."

He fished cutlery out of the drawer and directed Remus to the couch. It was just fried noodles from the box, but Regulus looked at them like they were the greatest thing he had ever laid eyes on. Hastily, he began to eat.

"What's it like in Grimmauld Place?" he asked with his mouth full. "You didn't know much last time. How did they react? What did they say?"

Remus opened his box too and began to eat, a little more reservedly than Regulus.

"It was pretty chaotic. First no one understood what happened. Got the house-elf pretty worked up. When it came out where you supposedly died, Voldemort was furious. Took off straight away."

Regulus almost choked. "Did he...find anything suspicious?"

"No, I don't think so. Though I was surprised he took such a burning interest in it..."

"I'm the first Death Eater in his ranks to die. I suppose he wanted to know how that could have happened."

"Hm." Remus eyed Regulus thoughtfully.

"But it's a good thing he didn't find anything," Regulus said quickly. "Then surely the dust has settled a bit in the last two weeks?"

Remus shrugged and swallowed his bite before answering. "They have talked about it a lot already. Also because you did most of the potions for everyone. I guess this Snape will be doing that now."

"Idiot..." was all Regulus muttered.

"I saw your mother, too. She seemed a bit short tempered, but otherwise quite composed."

Regulus nodded in resignation. "I wouldn't have expected anything else. She'll just be sad that she doesn't have an heir now."

"Quite possibly."

Regulus hesitated. "How's Barty?"

Remus poked busily at his noodles. "I've only been back for a few days, since then. Haven't really gotten to see him yet. Has been in his room a lot, I guess." He didn't mention Kreacher's saddened look when he'd asked him about Barty when he'd arrived a few days ago.

"He's very angry," was all the house-elf had said. And Remus had understood. He knew from Sirius the many faces of grief. And understood quickly when someone wasn't taking a death well.

"Hmm." Regulus glanced into his half-empty box and finally pushed it hesitantly onto the coffee table. "How was it with Sirius?"

Remus shrugged again. "It was okay." At least Sirius hadn't tired of repeating that. Remus had seen right through him anyway.

"Oh, okay... " Regulus pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around them. Tenuous silence followed that Remus couldn't quite interpret.

He tried to talk about a few other things, some of them trivial, just to be polite, because Regulus didn't see anyone else but him. But he was strangely silent, as if something else was occupying his mind. Remus took that as a sign that it was time to go. He silently signaled that to Regulus, who quickly reacted and prepared the book list and his potion for him. On his way to Remus, he was so rushed that he stumbled and almost dropped the box.

"Sorry," was all he said, shoving it roughly into Remus's hand.

"No problem." Remus eyed Regulus scrutinisingly.

"Come by again sometime. But only when you have time. I know you're busy as hell."

"Sure. Good luck for... whatever you do."

Remus was barely out of the hut when the door slammed behind him. He turned and regarded it thoughtfully.

What had that been all about?

***

It was already early December when Remus returned from the mission, late in the evening. Almost two weeks, again. Remus had tried everything remotely believable to shorten his absence, but Voldemort had had big plans. And when he said something, Remus couldn't (and wouldn't) do anything but sputter. Right now, though, he was almost regretting it.

He found Sirius sitting at the dining room table. His upper body was bent far forward, his face resting on his forearms. He was sound asleep. Remus hesitantly sat down next to him, glancing only fleetingly at the bottles of beer and liquor heaped in front of him before nudging Sirius.

"Hey," Remus whispered softly, but Sirius didn't respond. Even when he shook him harder and spoke louder, nothing happened. He hurriedly checked his pulse and whether he was still breathing, then sank back into his chair, feeling relieved, but also strangely helpless. Sirius was completely drunk, deep in his alcoholic slumber. Even an explosion probably couldn't wake him up right now.

Sighing, he set about getting Sirius into bed. It was a big and exhausting undertaking because Sirius had no tension left in his body and Remus was tired and drained. But a few minutes and dozens of curses later, he had finally laid him down in bed and covered him up. He stretched his aching back and looked at the soundly slumbering Sirius. His head felt empty. Individual thoughts were brewing, but they were all swallowed before they could take shape.

Before giving himself some rest, he climbed back down the stairs and did some tidying up. Every single liquor bottle that was not yet empty he took to the kitchen and poured the contents down the drain to the last drop. Even the unopened ones in the cupboard under the sink, all of them. When he saw all the empty bottles in front of him, he wanted to take each one and smash it against the wall. But he pulled himself together.

In the living room, he tried to distract himself further by cleaning. One spell and he could have left the room in a few seconds, but he felt the need to vent. So he took out the glass himself, threw the crumpled clothes into the wash, wiped down the floors and the table. At the latter, he noticed a letter lying unopened, lonely and abandoned among the sticky stains. It was addressed to him.

Irritated, he let go of his rag, reached for the letter and settled down on the chair. It wasn't from Dumbledore, he could tell by the writing. But who else would write to him?

He opened the seal and spread the letter out. It was very neatly written.

Remus,

The news of the last weeks and months about the war have really upset me. I know you are fighting in the front and I am very worried about you. I also know that we did not part on the best of terms last time. But I'm asking you to give me another chance. I would like to meet with you, just to know how you are. We don't have to talk about your mother if you don't

want to. I just want to see that you're okay.

Please contact me,

Your father

Remus lowered the letter to his lap and threw his head back.

Oh God, he thought annoyed. *Bad fucking timing.*

***

March 11, 1974

Dad is driving me crazy. Why can't he just wish me a happy birthday like a normal person? Always this gibberish, always these accusations. He still thinks I'm six years old. No wonder I never had any friends as a child. If it were up to him, I'd probably be chained to the bed so as not to take any risks. It's unbearable. I think I'll ask James if I can go and see him this summer.

The rest of the birthday was great, by the way. Sirius and the others smuggled cake out of the kitchen. Still can barely move.

***

It snowed, ever so lightly. It was fleeting beauty, since the streets were still wet from the previous steady rain. But it still made Remus and Sirius pause outside the flat for a moment, taking in the view.

"Do you think it's a good idea if I come with you?" asked Sirius, his face turned towards the grey sky.

Probably not, Remus thought. *My only memory of my father is him ordering me to stay away from you.*

“I want to play with my cards on the table. I'm tired of being told

what he wants me to do." *And I don't want to leave you alone.*

Little snowflakes landed on Sirius's face and melted on his warm skin. He looked thoughtful.

"But only if that's what you want?" Remus rubbed his cold hands together. "Otherwise, you just come along as a friend."

"Nah, it's okay." Sirius yawned, creating a large cloud of breath. "I'm curious to see how he reacts."

"His worst nightmare," Remus quipped, hoping it was true. He knew exactly five minutes of his father and a few diary entries. He was going to have to build his entire attitude on that for the next few hours. Hopefully it wouldn't go completely to shit.

"Come on, let's get this over with," Remus added, grabbing Sirius' hand.

"Can't wait." Remus saw Sirius's thin smile before they disappeared.

Lyall Lupin lived in a Muggle house block, on the third floor. It was a rather unadorned brick building, with small balconies, in the middle of a busy street in South London. Remus couldn't tell if he had always lived there, if Remus at some point even had lived there as well. The address his father had sent him on request had seemed completely unfamiliar. But that didn't mean anything.

Remus led the way, Sirius close on his heels. He rang the bell where he found his name, among a total of nine other names. It took only a few seconds, then they were let in.

Silently they strode up the stairs, heads bowed. Remus had no idea how to act, already regretting that he hadn't just burned the letter. He had thought it was a good opportunity to get to know his past self better, but right now the risks seemed much higher to him than the rewards.

"Hey," Remus heard faintly as he reached the third floor. He lifted his head and saw a tall, slightly bent figure standing at the front door. His father.

He looked a lot like Remus, at least in his subjective estimation. He had the same lanky build, the same curly hair. Remus also got his

bushy eyebrows and prominent nose from him. He only lacked all the scars.

"Hey," Remus replied neutrally and waited until Sirius had caught up before approaching further. He watched closely how Lyall reacted to Sirius. He seemed surprised, but not particularly bothered by it.

"I'm glad you arrived safely. And I'm really happy it worked out so quickly." His father thankfully didn't try to hug him or anything, but just stepped aside and invited them in.

The flat was pretty unspectacular inside too. A small two-room flat, small kitchen, colourful wallpaper. The furniture looked old, but everything was spotlessly clean.

Lyall led them through the flat to the small dining table, which was integrated into the kitchen. As he did so, he dropped a few introductory sentences about the flat, which led Remus to conclude that he had never actually been here before. Very good.

"I'm afraid Anna's not here today, she had to take the late shift this week," his father said as he gestured for them to sit down.

"No big deal," Remus said. *One less problem.*

"Do you guys want anything to drink? Coffee, tea, water? I think I have some..."

"Tea, please," Remus offered shortly, and Sirius added to that with a "Me too, please." Lyall put the kettle on, naturally. Remus wondered when he had last done magic.

They lapsed into awkward silence until the kettle started whistling. Sirius kept giving Remus brief sideways glances, which Remus returned firmly, a reassuring smile on his face.

His father poured the tea and placed the cups on the table for them. Settling down opposite Remus, he regarded him closely, his eyebrows drawn together in concern. Remus let it wash over him. He knew he wasn't looking very good at the moment. For that, he had Dorcas and the shitty basement dungeon in Grimmauld Place to thank.

"How are you?" he asked, in that 'not-just-politeness' tone of voice. Where was he supposed to start?

"Oh all right," he said lightly. " Much to do. Just living into the day

like that."

Lyall nodded and tipped some milk into his tea. "Certainly a lot of stress with all the attacks..."

"Exactly" Remus slid around on the chair. "A lot of stress."

Another awkward silence. Remus could sit this out easily, but he felt a little sorry for Sirius.

"So how have you been this past year?" he asked because of that, even though he didn't care at all.

"Oh, quite well. As you can see, Anna and I have finally found a new flat. Took quite a while, the prices are getting more and more outrageous."

"I can imagine." Remus couldn't imagine.

"What about you? What's your situation? Last I heard you were going to get a flat in Ealing?"

"Yeah, but that's outdated," Remus said, wondering if he'd ever lived there. "I live with Sirius now."

Lyall looked to Sirius and smiled painedly. "Yeah, good idea. I lived in a shared flat when I was young too. That's when you start to get used to the responsibility."

Remus smiled artificially. "Not quite," he said, placing his hand provocatively on Sirius's. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sirius suddenly sit bolt upright and his hand tighten harshly. But Remus didn't care, he just waited for Lyall's reaction, a strange feeling of satisfaction inside him.

Why so spiteful?, he asked himself. *You hardly know the poor man.*

But something inside him seethed, hissed that he deserved it.

This one his father wasn't moderating away as well as Sirius's surprise appearance before. At first he looked confused, then, when realisation finally hit him, his eyes widened, bouncing back and forth between Remus and Sirius several times, finally landing back on their now interlocked hands.

"So that's how it is..." he said, and swallowed. Then he fell silent.

"That's why I brought him today," Remus said, smiling provocatively. "I wanted to introduce him to you officially. So you can see he's not a monster. Or depraved, or any of the other things you've always so fondly claimed."

"Remus..." whispered Sirius, but Remus just shook his head decisively. He was surprised himself that that one little memory had sparked so much in him after all. Every day he learned something new about himself.

His father looked honestly struck by his words, at least he had the decency for that. He moistened his lips, took a big sip of his tea.

"Listen," he then finally brought out. "I don't want us to fight. I ... I said some stupid things, I realise that now. And I'm really sorry about that, too."

"I see," Remus simply said.

Lyall looked at him angrily. "You act like this has always been so terribly easy for me. I was really worried about you. I didn't want anything to happen to you."

If only you knew.

"As you can see, I'm very good at deciding what's good for me." He glared at Lyall. "You have a problem with that?"

His father sighed heavily, finally shaking his head. "No, son. I just want you to be happy. That's all I've ever wanted."

And in another fit of decency, he turned to Sirius. "I'm sorry for what I said about you. I let your last name blind me."

Sirius smiled indulgently, now visibly more relaxed after Lyall's approval. "I can't blame anyone for that."

"I hope we can start over." Remus looked at his father incredulously. This was going better than he'd ever imagined.

"Sure," Sirius smiled and took his first sip.

After that, the mood was actually quite good. They talked about the last few months in the Order and the situation in the Ministry. It was obvious that his father was turning away from the wizarding world

more and more. "For my sanity," he reasoned, and also because Anna didn't want to know anything about it. From his stories, she seemed to be a engaging person, seemed to have taken his father a bit away from his unhealthy caring. Maybe she really did him good.

At some point Remus excused himself to the toilet and took the opportunity to briefly get some fresh air on the balcony and have a smoke. He only smoked half a cigarette, though, so as not to leave poor Sirius alone with his father for too long.

But on his way through the living room, a few pictures on the wall caught his gaze. Inevitably, he stopped, stepped closer. There were several pictures of his father and a Mediterranean-looking woman with black curls. That had to be Anna. But in between he also found a picture of another woman. She was corpulent, her face full of freckles, with long blonde hair and a shy smile.

A sharp pain shot through Remus's head. Hissing, he grabbed his temple with one hand. With the other, however, he couldn't help himself; he reached out, stroking the dusty glass of the picture, her face.

Mum.

"Do you want it?" his father asked out of nowhere, and Remus winced. He was standing in the doorway to the living room, coming towards him. Behind him Sirius emerged, looking at them both thoughtfully.

"I have others of hers. So you're welcome to take it." He went to a drawer and began rummaging through it. Finally he pulled out a small photograph that had little dog-ears at the corners.

"Here, you can have this too. It's even got all of us in it." Remus accepted the picture, almost hesitantly. In it he recognised his parents sitting on an old couch, close together, Remus between them, on both their laps. He couldn't have been more than three or four. His parents looked young, happy. It had certainly been before the bite.

"Thank you," Remus said, swallowing hard. He couldn't look too closely at the picture or the headache would do something else to him.

Lyall hung the picture off and handed it to him. "You know how Hope was. Never got in front of a camera. You have to guard those few pictures like a treasure."

Hope.

Hope, Hope, Hope.

"Right, yeah." Remus smiled in anguish. He clutched the pictures to his chest like a possessive child their toy. He felt strange.

"I think we'll be getting on our way then," Sirius said casually. "Right, Remus? Got a lot to do today, haven't we?"

Remus gave him a grateful look. "Right."

"No problem," Lyall smiled. "It was nice of you to stop by. We should do it again sometime soon."

"Yeah, we can," Remus said quietly, and it wasn't even a lie.

His father saw them off, shaking Sirius's hand politely and even giving Remus a fleeting hug. "Thank you," he whispered as he did so, and Remus just nodded.

"I thought he was nice," Sirius then said as they stepped through the front door downstairs.

"Yeah," Remus said surprised. "Me too."

His headache did not get worse, even when he looked at the pictures in more detail later. That relieved him, logically. But a small, indefinable part of him was also almost disappointed about it. That part wanted to dream. Of freckles, hugs, care, affection.

That part wanted to remember.

***

July 7, 1974

Hey Mum,

Two years ago today, you died. It still feels unreal. I still miss you every day. I don't think it will ever stop.

Whenever I write here in the diary, I imagine I'm writing to you, it helps sometimes. Makes me feel less alone.

I really hope one day I can live like you. Face each day with a smile. As if nothing had ever hurt. As if we had never suffered.

I'm sorry, I know you could never stand this pessimistic drivel. I'll stop!

I love you.

I miss you.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Goliath' by Woodkid

Lyall redemption arc?!? I was surprised myself, ngl. But that's the best part of writing! Had a lot of fun.

Hope you liked it! 😊

See ya!

Chapter 34: Already Forgotten

Chapter Notes

CW Language

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't believe what you hear

I'm still here, even without you

Regulus often wondered if death had changed him. Even if it sounded somehow exaggerated, essentially it had been like that. He had died, at least for a brief moment. Before Remus had brought him back and almost cracked his ribs in the process. He had already spoken his grandiose, final words, relived pivotal moments. His life had been over, small, insignificant, just as it had always felt throughout his life. Somehow, at the bottom of the lake, he had made peace with that.

The thought made him shudder now. He was glad he was alive, that the darkness and the cold bodies that had clung to him had not become his last sensations. But it had done something to him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on yet.

Being alone in Remus's hut had something meditative about it. He was to himself, for the first time really, able to think what he wanted, make faces, talk to himself, walk around in rumpled clothes that were far too big. He could be himself. Theoretically.

Who are you anyway?, his inner voice sometimes asked him derisively, and Regulus never had an answer. He had collected many faces over the years, most of which didn't really suit him. He was still waiting to find one he liked. One that was maybe not so polished, not so beautiful. But real.

But the lonely isolation also showed him that he had not been as detached from everything as he had always tried to convince himself. He missed Barty, and Evan, quite a bit. Their pointless evenings together, their pseudo-deep conversations, Barty's stupid remarks and Evan's even stupider questions. They had always been a bright spot, no matter how bad things had been for Regulus. It wasn't the same

without them. He also missed Kreacher, the library, sometimes even his room, though it had made him feel suffocated many times.

But those little glimmers weren't enough to make him really regret his decision. What he had told Remus was, at its core, true. He was planning to destroy all the Horcruxes and it was better if Voldemort kept him off his radar. But the main reason was much more selfish. He didn't want to be part of this madness anymore. Killing any Muggle-borns or Ministry staff just because the madman wanted him to. He just couldn't do it anymore.

And if it hadn't been for the Inferi, surely something else would have eventually got him killed.

One way or another.

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The fucking Horcrux book. That was becoming a problem he couldn't continue to ignore. He hadn't told Remus to get it, it would have been far too obvious. He couldn't risk him taking a peek and possibly drawing the same conclusions as Regulus. He wasn't ready for that yet.

Besides, it wasn't in the library, it was hidden in his room where it had been readily available when he had been feverishly thinking about his plans at night. He hadn't read it completely yet, a few chapters were still missing. Probably also the one that explicitly said how to destroy Horcruxes.

That was why he needed it. As long as he didn't know how to get rid of this eerie medallion, whose threatening aura reached him even through the locked chest in the corner of his study, he wouldn't sleep through the night. And even if, thanks to Kreacher, he already had a few ideas and first leads to more Horcruxes, he would not risk his life again without an effective weapon.

Regulus found the solution to his dilemma on the thin quilt at the end of the couch. After close inspection, he pulled two light brown, hopefully human hairs from it and tossed them into his recently completed Polyjuice Potion. It hissed softly and turned a brownish, unappetising colour. Regulus sighed. A glance out the small window

told him that it had finally become light, grey and dreary, as it had been every day in December so far. There would be nothing going on in Grimmauld Place, the night was over, everyone involved in the night's attacks had gone to sleep by now. It was the ideal opportunity.

Disgusted, Regulus held his nose and drank.

And when he sat up again after a few agonising minutes, his clothes fit.

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He felt like he was walking on stilts when he stepped out of the hut. He was uncomfortably tall, his legs far too long, so from the outside he must look awkward as hell. At least he hadn't become a werewolf.

He apparated to Grimmauld Place and tried to look like his heart wasn't about to jump out of his chest. Tried to step up to the front door normally and naturally and knock on it normally and naturally. If Kreacher opened the door, would it be smart to tell him the truth? Or would that be...

The door was practically yanked open. A pale face shone at him, the hallway behind it dark and cold.

Fuck.

"Barty," Regulus said, struggling to match Remus's voice colour and intonation. His heart was pounding in his throat.

"What the fuck are you doing here this early?" croaked Barty. "Not even the fucking house-elf is back yet. Are you trying to get on my nerves?"

"I..." Regulus struggled to form a clear thought under Barty's probing gaze. He looked terrifying.

"What now? Gone mute?" Barty looked like he was going to slam the door at any moment.

"My... cloak was damaged on the last mission. I'm here to replace it."

"And you have to deal with that shit at nine in the morning?" Barty

shook his head dismissively. "You all piss me off so bad."

Barty didn't talk like that, ever. He didn't make a face like that, didn't radiate such aggression. Who was that in front of him?

"Come on, just let me into the basement real quick. I'll be out of here in a minute."

Barty frowned. "Can you even do this alone?"

"Yes, I've been there with Regulus before..."

Barty slammed the door against the wall so hard that the knob audibly made a notch in the plaster.

"Don't you dare put his name in your mouth," he said lowly, and Regulus shuddered.

"S-sorry." He looked at his friend with wide eyes.

Barty took one deep breath and then gestured erratically towards the descent of the stairs. "Hurry the fuck up. And then get out of here."

Regulus nodded obediently and entered. He didn't look too closely at Barty as he passed, to avoid appearing suspicious, but he still noticed his greasy, unkempt hair and the ruffles on his knuckles.

"You don't have to wait for me here, I know the way out myself," Regulus said hopefully nonchalantly.

Barty looked at him searchingly, for an uncomfortably long moment, and then snorted. Nothing more.

Regulus didn't know what that meant. As unbothered as possible, therefore, he turned and descended the stairs while thoughts circled in his head.

At the bottom he waited. He didn't need anything from there, he just hadn't thought of anything better on the spur of the moment. He needed to get to his damn room. But how was that going to happen with Barty waiting for him upstairs?

As soon as it was plausible in terms of time, he came back up, hoping that Barty had followed his suggestion. He exhaled with relief when he found the ground floor corridor deserted.

After a searching look through the open door into the living room, he

hurriedly crept up the stairs, cursing every little creak he made as he did so. He wished he had learned a decent invisibility spell beforehand.

He made it to just outside his door. So close to the book he was looking for, maybe even some matching clothes, at last. But then he felt an iron grip around his wrist, like a vice. Startled, he turned and recognised Barty staring at him like Cerberus at an uninvited intruder. The next shudder.

"What are you still doing here?"

That this shit would ever happen to him in his own house...

"I want to get into his room," Regulus said, honestly. "I want to see if I can find anything else... clues. About what happened."

"You won't find anything there," he replied mechanically. "Get out of here."

"How would you know?"

The grip on his wrist tightened even further. Regulus contorted his face in pain.

"He drowned," he said coldly. "Because he was in a fucking cave, full of fucking Inferi. What does it matter why? He's dead. He's not coming back. So it would all be pointless anyway."

Barty's gaze met his. Regulus felt the pain, the anger, the incomprehension. It was so clear it burned his skin.

He almost did it, in that moment. Almost hugged him, pressed his face against his shoulder, desperately. Almost swallowed his defences and the risks it would bring, and whispered the truth to him.

I'm not dead. I'm sorry. I miss you very much.

But Kreacher prevented it.

"Master Lupin, to what does Kreacher owe the honour?" he said as he came up the stairs. His expression was indistinct.

"I was just going to Regulus's room." Regulus felt the wince that ran through Barty's body at the mention of his name. He stared at Kreacher, hoping he understood, even if he didn't realise he wasn't looking at Remus there.

He did.

"Of course, would Master Lupin like Kreacher to help with something?" he asked submissively.

"That would be great." Regulus gathered the confidence to shake off Barty's hand, who let it happen with a scowl on his face. He leaned against the wall, arms folded, and watched reluctantly as Regulus and Kreacher approached his old room.

Kreacher had really been enough. The little house-elf, treated like dirt by everyone else, had let Barty loosen his grip. Had he always been so nice to him?

Regulus only allowed himself to take a breath as he closed the door to the room behind him. This was all going far less smoothly than he had hoped.

"Thank you, Kreacher," he said somewhat breathlessly. "My salvation again."

Kreacher didn't reply, regarded him critically. Regulus waved. "It's me. Polyjuice potion and all."

His obvious doubts seemed to dissolve. "Good to see Master again at last. Kreacher couldn't risk coming to see him these past few weeks."

"Understandable. I don't blame you. I hope they didn't put you through too much."

Kreacher shrugged. "Kreacher can take a lot."

"You shouldn't have to," Regulus retorted, as he often did.

But Kreacher didn't understand that, yet again.

"What is Master looking for? Does he need something?"

Regulus nodded, suddenly remembering what he was actually here for. Hastily he lifted the mattress off his bed, the slatted frame and finally grabbed the small box that stood underneath. It revealed the black book, with the individual loose pages Regulus had jammed back into it. Finally.

"Needed this book. Couldn't let Remus get it." He glanced at his wardrobe, filled to the brim with his things. It would be a relief to take them with him. If only he had thought of...

Kreacher seemed to read his thoughts. "Does Master need anything for transport?"

He nodded.

"Kreacher will be right back" And Kreacher was through the door again. Regulus sometimes didn't know what he had done to deserve him.

Somewhat restlessly he stowed the book in the inside pocket of his jacket and sat on the edge of his bed. Waited.

"So, found anything groundbreaking yet?" A mocking voice finally snapped him out of his thoughts. Barty was leaning in the doorway, an ugly smile on his face. It stung Regulus.

"No," Regulus said, letting his eyes wander to Barty's torn knuckles.

"What did you do?" he asked him.

Barty followed his gaze and looked at the back of his hand.

"What do you care?"

"Forget it," Regulus muttered, feeling a mixture of annoyance and biting, guilty conscience.

It's okay, he tried to calm himself. *Of course he's angry right now. But he will get over it. It's still safer for him to not know anything.*

His curt retort earned him a quiet, mirthless smile.

"Don't worry, you probably won't have to put up with me for much longer anyway."

Regulus's upper body stiffened.

"What?"

Barty shrugged. "Overshot the mark, during the last mission. Got busted. And now the whole Ministry knows Barty Crouch Jr. is a Death Eater."

It took Regulus a moment to understand what that meant.

"Your father..." he muttered in horror, not caring that he sounded nothing like Remus when he said it.

"Will now do everything in his power to find me. I don't think it'll take much longer until he does." He smiled as he said that. And the worst part of it was that Regulus couldn't even tell if it was just put on.

Indifferent.

"You're safe here," Regulus said forcefully, partly to reassure himself. "No one will find you here."

"You don't know my father, Remus Lupin," Barty said, leaning his head against the doorframe. "He's one of the most ambitious and vain wizards in the world. And I've just ruined his reputation forever."

Regulus pressed his lips together. He wasn't Remus, he knew Bartemius Crouch Sr. and he knew Barty was right. He would turn over every stone, pull out all the stops. Would all the protective spells on this house really stand up to that?

Barty turned his head back and then stepped out of the doorway to make way for Kreacher, who brought over a small box. Without much pretence of politeness, the house-elf grabbed the door and closed it in front of Barty. Regulus's protest did not make it past his lips.

"Everything should fit in there. The spell is intact," Kreacher said and handed him the box. Regulus accepted it gratefully and hurriedly began to put away everything possible. He couldn't completely ransack his room, it would probably attract attention. But he could in good conscience take a few loads of clothes and other, albeit mostly inconsequential, belongings. They were too good to let rot here.

"Kreacher," Regulus said at one point, just before he finished putting things away. "Look after Barty, please. His father is after him and he's very dangerous. He can't get him. Make sure he doesn't leave Grimmauld Place unless it's an emergency."

Kreacher looked pained. "Kreacher is doing what he can, Master. But if Master Walburga or Master Voldemort order otherwise, Kreacher can do nothing."

"I know," Regulus muttered, putting the lid on the box. "But if there's any way possible, I'm asking you to protect him. It would mean a lot to me."

Kreacher was silent for a moment, his gaze heavy. Then he nodded, gravely. "Kreacher will do everything in his power."

"Thank you," Regulus said. And Kreacher probably didn't even begin to understand how much he meant it.

They left the room and a glance at the clock told Regulus that he didn't have much time left before the Polyjuice Potion lost its effect. He made his way back to the entrance, closely followed by Kreacher. He peered into every open room, into every corner of the house. This time with a different intention, this time he was looking for Barty, wanted to see him again before he left, perhaps for good.

But he was gone.

***

"Are you kidding me?" shouted Regulus loudly, slapping his hand over his face. "You've got to be fucking kidding me?" He laughed hysterically. To an outsider, he had to look completely insane.

Oh, who was he kidding anymore? He was completely insane.

The fucking Horcrux book lying in front of him, half tattered and insane, was proof of that. Two words he had marked there before his emotional outburst. Before he had fully understood what they meant.

Basilisk Blood

FiendFyre

His options, the only ones according to this book, to destroy the Horcruxes. Why hadn't he read this before? How was he supposed to accomplish this?

Sure, somewhere in the world there were probably still basilisks, and somewhere there were bound to be a few drops of blood circulating. But how was he ever going to get it? And the fiendfyre version sounded even more insane, how would anyone ever survive that?

What the hell had he gotten himself into?

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Schon vergessen/Already Forgotten' by Search Yiu

Hope you liked it!

See ya! ~

Chapter 35: Poor Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And everytime my heart calls for you

And chaos erupts inside of me

I send my soldiers

To break down the resistance

Remus's biggest Christmas present to Sirius was time together. He gave him other stuff, of course, concert tickets for Van Halen and a Mad Max-style leather jacket, but it only felt like an accessory. Because they both knew that soon his departure would hover over them again, like a sword of Damocles. It was an endless, cruel loop.

He had managed to stay with Sirius this month, although the current situation in the war did not really allow it. But he couldn't have brought himself to do anything else, not with Sirius's current state of mind.

It was a small, intimate, cosy Christmas. They cooked together, listened to music, even danced exuberantly to it, after a few glasses of wine. From the outside they probably looked like the perfect couple. With no problems, no worries. It was a nice first Christmas for Remus.

They also spent the days after in almost utopian harmony. Sirius laughed a lot and Remus was quite sure that he didn't drink secretly during that time. Remus could actually enjoy those days too, for some reason. His headaches, the scourge of the last few months, were subsiding. Slowly, unhurriedly, but they did. There were sometimes whole days when they didn't appear, when he could play his part to Sirius more than convincingly. They disappeared, even though he didn't do anything differently.

Maybe he really had the worst behind him.

Until after the New Year, they kept almost to themselves. Sirius had to work a lot, but he still seemed reasonably balanced. He helped Remus get through the full moon (he had convinced him not to visit the hut for the time being) and Remus enjoyed the fact that he finally felt freedom again and not only the narrow cellar walls of Grimmauld Place.

It was only when Alice and Frank's party was coming up that they went out again. They had invited Remus and Sirius to their house, a blatant recklessness, given the fact that they knew about a spy in their ranks. But if Remus had learned anything about Alice and Frank Longbottom in the last year, it was that they were kind-hearted. Far too kind-hearted.

They lived in the suburbs, one out of a picture book. White facades, carefully shoveled pavements and driveways, occasional tacky Christmas decorations. It was obviously a Muggle neighbourhood, probably chosen precisely because it looked so boring, indifferent and unremarkable. The perfect, soulless hideaway. Until now, at least. Because now Remus knew where they lived.

Alice looked well when she greeted them at the door. Red-cheeked, with alert, bright eyes and an upright posture.

"Oh wow! That I get to see the mysterious agent of Dumbledore again for once? What an honour." She curtsied, making Sirius laugh.

"Of course! I've cleared some extra time in my schedule, just for you."

"Appreciate it, my lord." She hugged them both and then motioned for them to enter.

Alice refrained from any kind of control question, just as Marlene had back then. She was lucky that the person next to Remus wasn't a Death Eater this time.

"Peter, Grace and Mary are already here," Alice fluted, leading them into a cosy conservatory, its window front covered with sprawling plants and centred on a round dining table. Familiar faces beamed at them.

"Moony!" said Peter, smiling broadly. "It's been far too long."

"Since the wedding," Remus agreed, hugging them in turn.

"You've been to the hairdresser, I suppose?" commented Mary when he had reached her.

"Yeah, you could say that." His hair had thankfully grown back a few inches in the last few weeks and no longer made him look like a convict. However, he still had two small bald spots above the nape of his neck. Probably the fire had damaged the skin there too much.

"You looked better with the old haircut!" said Mary straightforwardly, as usual.

"Yes, I noticed that too," Remus admitted.

Feel free to pass it on to Dorcas.

He looked around, "Is Frank here too?"

Alice gestured towards the kitchen. "He'll be along in a minute."

"Okay." Remus smiled politely. He and Sirius sat down at the table and the others followed.

"How's your mission going?" asked Peter curiously.

"Same as always. Busy, no end in sight. But I'm making progress in the last few months at least."

"And you're still not allowed to talk about it?"

Remus shook his head apologetically. "Sorry."

Peter waved it off indulgently. "Oh, I understand. I'll keep trying anyway."

Polite laughter. "Do that."

He looked back and forth between Grace and Peter and became curious himself. "How are things going at the Ministry? Can imagine it's difficult right now."

Peter and Grace nodded in unison, all at once gloomy.

"It's really bad," Grace said fearfully. "I have to plan an extra half hour in the mornings by now, until I get through all the locks and checks. The Minister of Magic has developed a downright paranoia."

"Which I can understand," Peter added. "The Department of Magical

Law Enforcement has been completely dismantled by the Death Eaters. Who knows what else is coming. I don't know how much longer we can work there..." He gave Grace a meaningful look.

"The atmosphere there is similar to the Order," Grace added. "Everyone's scared."

Sirius slapped the table gently but firmly with the flat of his hand. "Let's not talk about the war, okay?"

Remus gave him a fleeting sideways glance and nodded immediately. "Sure, you're right."

Alice seemed more than happy about that as well. "Great idea! Today we shouldn't think about it."

At that moment, the doorbell rang again. Alice hurried out of the conservatory and shortly afterwards Lily and James appeared at the doorway. They both looked a little nervous and you could still clearly see the after-effects of the flu on James. He looked sickly, thin, pale. But at least he was showing his face again.

"It's really good to see you all again!" said James exuberantly, although his facial expressions and posture did not match his enthusiasm. "Was getting really bored."

"We're glad you're back too," Sirius said with a heavy sigh. "Without you, the stupid Order meetings were more boring than ever!"

"I can imagine." James lowered his eyes theatrically. "Even in the darkest hours, it's good to see an attractive face for a change."

Peter and Grace chuckled, but Sirius just rolled his eyes. "Have you looked at yourself in the mirror, Prongs? You could work as a ghost at Hogwarts."

"Oh, Lily, the lime can talk! Watch out!"

Sirius laughed and hugged James. "Oh, you stupid idiot," he said, almost crushing James.

He squeezed back at least as tightly. "Almost forgot how much strength you have."

"Pah, you just went soft!"

Remus saw James smile softly.

"Quite possibly."

Remus let the welcoming hug wash over him as well. Just as they were all seated, Frank joined them and announced that the food was about ready.

"Just in time, I'm starving!" exclaimed James. The more good humour he tried to spread, the less Remus bought it.

A few minutes later, a huge pot with chili was on the centre of the table and Frank poured them all a more than generous portion into their bowls. Afterwards, the pot wasn't even half empty.

"Who are you going to feed with that? A mountain troll battalion?" Remus's question earned him an amused snort from Mary.

Alice smiled. "I just didn't want any of you to go hungry!"

"We could eat on that for a week." Remus tasted his first spoonful. It tasted amazing.

There was a gluttonous silence for a while, broken only now and then by praise on how good it was. Next to Sirius's and his own cooking skills, which could be described as modest at most, it was a welcome change for Remus.

After the meal, Remus sat back and could already feel the food coma setting in. It was great. Alice and Frank, like the perfect hosts they were, swiftly took the empty bowls back to the kitchen and provided them with drinks and snacks. Remus felt thoroughly satisfied.

"So, my dears," Alice said as she and Frank sat back down at the table after their work was done. "I'm very glad you're all here." Alice and Frank exchanged a look. "Because we have something to announce."

Remus guessed it before she said it.

"We're going to be parents!"

"Ohh!" made Mary immediately and jumped up. "Congratulations!" The next round of hugs.

"Congratulations!" came from Sirius and the others as well.

"We have to toast to that!" insisted Mary and Frank nodded.

"Before that," Alice gave Lily a meaningful look, but she hastily waved

it off.

"No, no way! This is your day." she said hurriedly and Remus let his eyes dart back and forth between them in alarm.

"We'd really like to share it."

"Really?", Lily assured herself and Alice and Frank nodded eagerly.

"All right," Lily straightened in her chair, her shoulders visibly tense. James beside her paled another shade.

"So well, as it just so happens... I have something to announce as well."

Sirius beside him leaned forward intently. Remus realised that there wasn't a huge range of things to announce in this way. He couldn't quite believe it, however, until he heard her say the words.

"I'm pregnant too."

This time the reaction was slightly delayed. It took a few moments for the words to sink in.

"No way!" was the first thing Sirius finally exclaimed, before an oversized grin spread across his face. What followed were - who would have thought! - more hugs.

Remus remained seated, content with a surprised exclamation and a "Great! Happy for you!"

Peter, too, seemed blown away. "You'll make great parents."

"I'm already feeling overwhelmed," James admitted, and suddenly his tension made sense too.

Mary slapped him on the shoulder, perhaps a little too hard. "You'll do great." She turned back to Alice and Frank, who were both beaming. "That's amazing! Frank, now come on!"

Frank stood up laughing, fetched a mixture of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks from the kitchen for everyone to help themselves to. Remus took a cider, Sirius joined Lily and Alice with the non-alcoholic alternatives.

"To the offspring of the Potter and Longbottom family!" shouted Sirius solemnly, and they toasted.

The evening passed really quickly. There was a lot to talk about, even though they regularly returned to the children's topic, logically enough. Both Remus and Sirius were relatively quiet during these conversations, but Sirius still seemed to be having a good time and that was the most important thing. The cider tasted very good too, but Remus held back on it as usual. The only effect it had on him was an increased need to smoke.

"Crazy," Sirius muttered as the two of them stood outside the frontdoor at some point, taking a drag on their cigarettes. It was freezing cold, especially in direct contrast to the heated conservatory.

"We're getting old," Remus said, because he could imagine that going through Sirius's mind.

"M-hm." Sirius's thumb ran over the filter of the cigarette. "That doesn't really want to go through my head yet."

"Oh, don't worry. Once the nipper is here, we won't be able to imagine the time without them."

"Don't get me wrong," Sirius flicked the ashes, "I'm really looking forward to it. But somehow..."

"Is it because of Voldemort?"

Sirius bit his lower lip. "Yeah, maybe.... I sometimes wish I had Alice's and Frank's optimism. But like this, I just worry."

Remus stroked his back reassuringly, as if he wasn't the cause of most of his worry.

"Nothing will happen to them. The war will be over eventually and then the children will be able to grow up happily."

"Wow, now you're so optimistic too."

"One of us has to start."

Sirius gave him a brief amused look and then continued to smoke silently. He looked much more thoughtful than usual, not even seeming to notice that Remus was watching him incessantly. He wondered if Sirius had ever wanted to have children, if he had ever

even thought about it. Surely in House Black one grew up with the task? Producing an heir, carrying on the bloodline. Always keeping himself ready to be introduced to his future wife, even in his early teens. Just the thought sounded awful.

"Do you actually want children someday?", Sirius asked him out of nowhere, as if he had just thought the exact same thing.

"Phew, don't know," he started, trying not to let the hesitation get too long. "Don't think something like me should have responsibility for children." He wasn't just referring to being a werewolf, but about all the rest. Murderer, Death Eater, traitor. That was what he was. And he would never stop being that.

Sirius didn't like his words at all. Reproachfully, he flicked his index finger at Remus's cheek. "Stop that! You'd make a great father."

Remus looked apologetically at Sirius and rubbed his cheek. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Stop it!" said Sirius sternly, putting away his cigarette butt. "You're patient, you're loving and you know a solution to almost everything." He pointed almost accusingly at Remus, as if not complimenting him. "You would be the best father a child could ask for. End of discussion!"

Remus laughed away Sirius's enthusiasm, but inside he felt something rumbling. It didn't help that Sirius stepped closer, took the cigarette out of his mouth and put a hand gently to his face.

"I'm really lucky to have you," Sirius whispered, kissing him.

It wasn't a headache that followed. But something that Remus would put in the same category. A throbbing in his chest, a sinking feeling in his stomach, and other sensations. They weren't painful, but they still made Remus uncomfortable.

He broke the kiss as soon as it was justifiable and forced himself to look at Sirius. "I'm very lucky, too."

Sirius gave him a smile, one of the rare ones that reached his eyes as well.

"Glad to hear it," he said softly. And Remus's heart skipped a beat.

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January 10, 1975

Sirius has a girlfriend. Teresa something. I hate her. Not because she's Sirius's girlfriend or anything, of course. But it's just her attitude. She thinks she owns him. Like he's a bad boyfriend just for spending time with us - his BEST FRIENDS - instead of her. Who does she think she is? She even told Sirius once that she thinks I'm rude because I'm always so curt with her.

SHE SHOULD ASK HERSELF WHY!

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March 11, 1975

They broke up. Thank God.

***

Everytime my heart calls for you

And it's burning in the streets inside of me

I order my army to do everything

to silence it again

As February rolled on and the anniversary of Remus joining the Death Eaters approached, something happened. Something big, by all accounts. It started when Sirius returned from the Order meeting one

afternoon, earlier than expected, and was visibly irritated.

Remus let him arrive in peace first, continuing to flick through the photo album of his friends that he had been drawn to from time to time lately. He waited until Sirius sat down with him, his gaze fixed thoughtfully into emptiness.

"All good?" asked Remus, flipping the album closed.

"That was weird," Sirius stated, looking a little perplexed.

"The meeting?"

He nodded. "Dumbledore was there."

Remus straightened up. "Really? Since when does he come to meetings?"

"First time today."

"And what did he want?"

"He didn't tell. But he seemed really nervous. I've never seen him like that before. Said weird things, talked about some 'important discovery'. And he really wanted to talk to Alice and Lily, in private."

"Sounds strange," Remus admitted. "But who knows if one is related to the other. Maybe he was just suggesting they slow down, now with the pregnancy."

"Could be, yeah." He didn't look convinced.

The second clue that something was going on was the increasing tingling of his dark mark. It was confirmed with an unexpected notification from another *Circus Letum* prospectus. It was brief, addressed directly to him.

Tonight, Grimmauld Place. The Dark Lord wishes to speak with you.

He found an excuse for Sirius, who was still so exhausted from his early shift that he did not inquire further. When evening came, Remus said goodbye to him in a good mood, as if he wasn't shaking from the nervousness. He hadn't seen the Dark Lord in a few weeks. Especially not in private, as the message had made it seem. What did he want from him?

Grimmauld Place was pretty quiet, despite the normally busy hour. Kreacher let him enter without a word and, as usual, gave no indication that he had anything to do with him in any way. He led him up the stairs to a small meeting room where the Dark Lord was already waiting, sitting upright on one of two high-backed chairs.

A good start to keep Lord Voldemort waiting, he scolded himself as Kreacher closed the door behind him and he was alone with him.

The fascination Remus had with Voldemort was as strong as ever. In his presence, Remus felt clear, complete, as if everything made perfect sense. It was a blessing to his mind.

"Remus Lupin, sit down," Voldemort said, gesturing elegantly to the still vacant chair two steps in front of him. Remus obeyed, as if pulled by an invisible rope.

"What can I do for you, My Lord?" he asked once he was seated.

Voldemort placed his hands flat on the table, his dark gaze catching Remus's and not letting go.

"One of my spies has sent me an important piece of information, regarding the Order. Urgent action is required."

Remus swallowed. "What information?"

"A prophecy," Voldemort said straightforwardly. Then he leaned forward, the hint of a smile on his lips. "If you tell what I'm about to tell you to even one person, I fear our working relationship will come to a sudden and irreversible end."

Remus nodded immediately. "You know you can rely on me."

"I do," Voldemort said, leaning back again. "That is why you are here and that is why I'm speaking to you. You are one of my most loyal followers. And I have a mission for you."

"Anything," Remus said without hesitation, wetting his lips.

"This prophecy," he began, "says that someone with the power to defeat me will be born. By someone who has defied me three times. At the end of July."

Remus froze.

"I know that means someone in the Order, no one else has defied me

so many times. This threat must be eliminated as soon as possible, do you understand?"

Remus nodded mechanically, unable to do anything else.

"I need you to find out for me who fits that description. Taking these people out will become our next objective and our highest priority."

An internal battle flared between Remus, the sides of which he could not name. It was a bloody battle and the part that eventually won pushed Remus's lips apart and made him say, "My lord, I already know the names."

Curiosity flashed in Voldemort's black eyes. "Which are?"

"Alice Longbottom and Lily Potter. They are both pregnant and their children will both be born at the end of July."

Voldemort's eyes snapped open. "Is that so?"

"Yes. I found out first hand." Remus felt an eerie silence inside him.

"That's a great help to me. I knew I could rely on you."

"Always," Remus said, his mouth dry.

"Then I'll put my best people on those two. If, with your help, we can prevent the children from coming into this world, then the prophecy may lose its effect."

"That sounds good."

"And as for you." Voldemort put an arm across the back of his chair, looking appreciatively at Remus. "You find out where they live, how they are secured and how we can best get to them. I'm sure Dumbledore will want to keep a close eye on them. But with you on my side, I'm firmly convinced we can get around that too."

"Understood," Remus said as if shot out of a gun. He shouldn't think too much about what this exchange meant. It was enough for him to listen to Voldemort's voice. What he wanted was all that mattered, after all.

"And get ready. Along with the two women, we will destroy the rest of the Order. They're getting on my nerves, so it's about time we finally burn out that rat's nest, down to the last one."

That sounds great, Remus wanted to say. But the lump in his throat was suddenly so big that he couldn't bring himself to say it.

Voldemort took his silence as approval. Patronisingly, he dismissed Remus with a wave of his hand.

"Just be patient. Together, you and I will achieve great things."

Remus nodded and turned to leave. His limbs felt unusually stiff.

So the time had come.

Till it‘s gagged, broken and locked away

and finally obeys me

my poor heart

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Meine Soldaten/My Soldiers' by Maxim (return of the king <3)

Remus bb… one step forward, two steps back. Don’t do this to me :‘(

See yaa!

Chapter 36: Don't Dance

Chapter Notes

CW Problematic Drinking Behaviour, Anxiety-induced Depression

Another double upload! Hope you like these chapters.
I won't be able to upload for a bit but I'll get right back to it as soon as I can! 😊 Aiming for the end of next week.

Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maybe I got lost in the moment

But I see beyond your scars

Maybe I'm just there in your memories

Or maybe I'll heal your heart

James looked like a tourist to Sirius as he wandered through the flat. As if at an art opening, he looked at the picture of Remus's mother that they had placed on a shelf in front of the living room wall. Then he stared at the record player, the records and finally at the books next to it. Sirius watched him from the dining table, a little puzzled.

"Why don't you sit down?," he offered hesitantly.

James winced, his head jerking in Sirius's direction. "Uh yeah, sure." His gaze wandered back towards the bookshelf, lingering on a book.

"Could I borrow this?" James asked, pulling the book from the row.

Sirius looked at it appraisingly, taking a while to remember where they'd got it from in the first place. "Er I think so. Remus bought it quite a while ago, but I never saw him read it. I'm sure he won't miss it." James took the book and brought it with him to the dining table, where he was finally sitting down.

"You do know this is a Muggle book, right?" Sirius asked as James put it in his bag.

"Yeah yeah. Just ... heard Lily rave about it recently, so I thought I'd give it a read."

"Well, have fun with it."

James nodded and folded his hands on the table. Sirius could tell he was looking for a start.

"To what do I owe this unexpected honour?" he therefore asked as a jump start. "Don't get me wrong, Prongs, you know you're always welcome here. But you've been rather... withdrawn these last few weeks."

James looked better than he had at Alice and Frank's party. But something was still wrong, Sirius sensed it. And it ran much deeper than a simple flu.

"You probably overheard Dumbledore... talking to Lily," he began haltingly. Sirius nodded, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration.

"It was about us... and the baby."

"Something bad?"

"Don't really know yet... He thinks we're in danger. Especially Lily." He seemed to be searching for the right words. "He said we have to hide. Just like Alice and Frank."

"So move into one of those safehouses?"

James nodded, his expression scowling. "Something like that. He knows from a secret source that Voldemort will be hunting us. That's why he wants us out of the picture. Like, completely."

"So you mean withdraw from the Order and go into complete hiding?"

James looked at Sirius ruefully, it was answer enough. Sirius felt something tighten inside him.

"I mean, if it's for your safety, then it's probably for the best." Sirius lowered his gaze. "Even if it probably means we won't..."

"Won't be seeing each other for a while, yes," James finished. "We'll be moving soon, Dumbledore has it all set up. Almost no one will know where we are staying. I'll probably be doing some stuff for the Order over the next few days, but after that...."

"And you're here to say goodbye?" Sirius pressed his knees against the underside of the tabletop. The dull ache soothed him.

"Not only that." James's voice sounded occupied. "I've come for several things." Sirius's gaze darted upwards. James fixed him. "I want to talk to you about something... And ask you a favour."

"Oh, that sounds mysterious," Sirius tried to joke, but his tone slipped a little.

"You're my best friend," James began without mincing words, and Sirius felt fear rolling in. When James started like that, it never meant anything good.

"And I realized, as best friends, we should be able to talk about everything." James kneaded his fingers, another bad sign. Sirius watched him do it as if hypnotised.

"...Meaning?"

"We need to talk about R...gul...s."

"What?" Sirius leaned forward.

Reflexively, James backed away. "About Regulus," he repeated, a little too loudly.

"Why should we? He's gone."

"Yes... he is. But we still need to. Because it's eating me up inside knowing how you two parted ways. How you still think about him. I can't bear it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"He was not a bad person, Pads. He just never got a chance." James was talking fast now, Sirius could hardly follow. "Reg was kind, honest, creative and so much more. I just wish you could have seen that."

Reg.

That was the only word that stuck in Sirius's ears.

Why did he call him that? Nobody called him that, except...

"Believe me, if you'd *really* got to know him you would have realized

that as well."

"How did you know him, then?", Sirius asked angily. "What gives *you* the expertise to talk about *my* brother like that?"

James hesitated. "I... I just know it."

"How?" Sirius knew he hid something, could see it in his eyes. That alone hurt already.

James shook his head. And Sirius looked at him, piercingly, until he seemed to falter, a panic in his face Sirius had never seen on him before.

"In the last year of school," James's voice rolled over. "You and I didn't get along very well then, remember?"

"Yeah."

"I was away a lot. You knew I was hiding something. It almost drove you crazy. We argued so often."

"I remember." Sirius's voice sounded colder than he intended. He couldn't tell if it was a protective mechanism. Because his insides felt sore. More so with each sentence.

"The truth is... I was with him. And that's why I really do know him. He was just so wonderf..."

"That's enough." Sirius put his hands flat on the table. To make them stop shaking.

I was with him.

James maybe thought that he was subtle with his choice of words. But Sirius knew him better than anyone else. To him these words left no room for interpretation. And the implication of that was so fucking horrible that Sirius wanted to throw up.

"Please, you have to believe me..."

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Sirius clenched his hands into fists. "That's enough."

James remained silent. Better for him, Sirius couldn't guarantee for anything. He felt sick to his stomach.

"Get out of here," he said curtly.

He needed a drink, now.

James didn't move from the spot, even though his eyes widened in horror and confusion. What was he doing acting so innocent? What the hell had he expected?

"I'll go in a minute, I promise." James was talking so fast Sirius could barely understand him. "Just let me explain..."

"Explain what?" Sirius looked at James, stunned, on the verge of standing up and knocking the table over. "That you fucked my brother? *My* little brother? Behind my back? Even though you knew what he did to me?"

James, that fucking idiot, only now seemed to realize that Sirius had seen right through him. His face went blank. And Sirius continued.

"And now that he's dead and I'm trying to get some closure and finally find my peace, you come around the corner with *this*? Have you been fucked in the head? What do you think you're doing? You're such a, such a..." He ran out of words. He couldn't describe how badly he wanted to punch James. The urge became overwhelming.

"I'm sorry," was all the bastard said, even repeated it a few more times. It didn't make any difference.

"James, either you get the hell out of here right now, or I promise you I will punch you in the face."

"I can understand you being angry. I didn't want you to find out like this. I just wanted to help you."

"Last warning." Sirius couldn't put into words how serious he was. His fingernails dug painfully into the heels of his hands, his body tensed to the breaking point.

"Okay." Now he actually seemed to realise. Better late than never. He rose, careful, as if moving too jerkily might provoke Sirius. Perhaps he was right.

James put distance between them both, slowly. As he did so, he started babbling again. "I know this is possibly the worst time to do this. But I still need your help. It's about what Dumbledore said. There's a spell..."

"How about you just shove your favour up your ass, how does that sound?" Sirius rose from his chair because he just couldn't sit still anymore. He followed James on his way to the door, menacingly, slowly, his fists still clenched.

"Maybe this is the last chance... maybe we won't see each other again."

James was such an unfathomable, insufferable jerk. If this was their last meeting, why did he have to sully it like this? How could he do this to him? Suddenly he was struggling not to burst into tears.

"Get out of my sight. Traitor." He blinked intently. Just a few more minutes. In a moment he'd be gone.

"This is not how we part, Sirius. I refuse."

"If you had even one brain cell, you would have realised how this conversation would end. I want you to leave. How many more times?"

Sirius took two sharp steps towards him, shoving him towards the door. James didn't resist.

"I'm not leaving like this," James rambled on, frantically. Sirius could sense that he hadn't expected his reaction to be so fierce. Another proof that James didn't really know him.

Sirius wrenched the front door open, using magic. It slammed violently against the wall. This time, one look was enough and James seemed to understand, finally. Completely destroyed, with tears in his eyes and drooping shoulders, he followed Sirius's instruction and left the flat into the snowy cold. Before he could utter any pointless last words, Sirius slammed the door shut, so hard that it shook on its hinges. Finally.

Instantly he ran upstairs to the bedroom. He yanked open the bottom drawer of his dresser, rummaging frantically through the socks until he finally had it in his hands. Fortunately, Remus hadn't found it.

He ripped the cap off the bottle, put it on and drank. And drank.

Until he no longer knew who he was.

***

He had those dreams again, in the days that followed. He thought he was waking up, into the cold, bleak reality. Into a world where Remus didn't exist. Where he had imagined everything. All the joy, all the love. In which the bed next to him would remain cold forever. Where Remus Lupin was nothing more than a fairy tale. One of those cruel old ones, the one without a happy ending.

But he came back. This time too. Found him once more in this embarrassing state. Sirius was ashamed of it, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was weak, he couldn't cope. When he was alone, he was completely at his own mercy. Was overwhelmed by worries that he couldn't do anything about, no matter how much he drank. They always stayed there, eating him up from the inside, leaving a little less each time.

Remus was warm. He tucked him into bed, lovingly, gently. Lay with him, even though he was certainly not a pretty sight. Put his arms around him, erased the fear, in one fell swoop. Only he could do that. Only him.

"Everything will be all right," he whispered. And for a brief moment, it was.

***

Normally, Remus always asked what was wrong as soon as he returned. Or at least as soon as Sirius was responsive again. But this time he took his time, into the afternoon, until they had cleaned up Sirius's mess in the flat in silent agreement and were standing in the kitchen together, peeling potatoes for dinner.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked casually then, his standard question.

"James was here." Sirius dropped his peeled potato into a bowl filled with water and reached for the next one. It helped that his hands were busy.

"Oh really?" asked Remus, sounding genuinely surprised. "He finally ventured out into the daylight again?"

Sirius didn't feel like joking. "Did you know he had a thing with

Regulus at school?"

Remus cut his finger. "Fuck!" he cursed loudly, shaking his hand wildly and drawing in a hissing breath. "You're kidding!" he shouted in horror as he reached for the kitchen roll.

Sirius watched the spectacle motionlessly. "The bastard wanted to talk about Regulus. And he was so bad with it that I figured it out right away."

Remus tore a strip off the roll and pressed it onto his finger. Only when he had the bleeding under control did his full attention return to Sirius.

"Are we talking about *Regulus Black*? Your brother? When is this supposed to have happened? And more importantly, how?"

Sirius had to admit that he was glad for Remus's obvious surprise. It felt good to know that James hadn't just been lying to him for years.

"It was late sixth, early seventh year. When James was being all weird with us and disappearing all the time." Sirius took a deep breath as the tightness in his chest returned. "But no idea how that came about. Always kept my distance from Reg, after all. After he let me down."

Remus shook his head in disbelief, seeming to have already forgotten about the bleed-through paper in his hand. "Now some things do make more sense," he muttered.

"Like what?" Sirius had been far too angry and drunk to think about such things until now.

Remus leaned against the counter. "Well, I didn't buy the flu thing from the start."

Sirius paused.

"Remember when you told him about his death on the phone? He hung up on you, didn't he? And then we didn't see him for weeks. He was grieving."

Remus didn't look angry at all, as Sirius had expected. More like thoughtful.

He was grieving. The words sounded wrong. Sirius didn't want to hear them.

"You'll have to give me some context, though," Remus continued. "Was that the reason for his visit? Why did he bring up Regulus again?"

"He was babbling something about how he couldn't take it anymore, I don't know. And he told me that Dumbledore had spoken to them about some super secret thing."

"What sort of thing exactly?"

Sirius shrugged, turned back to his chopping board and grabbed the next potato. "He wouldn't say much. Just about them being in danger, more than ever. And that they were moving."

"Where are they moving to?"

"I don't know. I don't think they'll tell anyone. Some safe house nobody can find. They won't be showing their faces again either... I'm sorry about Lily, but I can't be bothered with James right now, that wanker."

"So when are they moving?"

Sirius looked at Remus, frowning.

"... Just so I can say goodbye to them."

"Oh, good question. I chased James away before we worked out the details."

Remus looked at Sirius in silence. As often, Sirius wished he could decipher his thoughts.

"I can understand you being pissed, I really can. That was an absolute arsehole move."

Sirius was already expecting the big 'but' and an ensuing moral lecture, but it actually didn't come. Remus let the sentence stand as it was. A relief.

Remus looked for a plaster for his wound while Sirius cut the remaining potatoes. He was still completely out of it and hurt and upset, but it had been good to talk about it for a bit. Slowly, he dared to really think about what James had told him yesterday. And Remus was right. Retrospectively, a lot of things made more sense now.

James's lousy excuses, all the lies Sirius had always despised so much. Hadn't he noticed James peeking at the Slytherin table from time to

time? Hadn't he felt like he'd run into Regulus more often, in places where he hadn't expected to see him? Hadn't he sometimes had a horribly familiar smell in his nostrils at night during James's stealthy return? Hadn't James once...

He had to stop this.

***

For two days he heard nothing from James. Two days that hadn't done much to ease his mind. On the contrary. The clearer he became again and the more situations he remembered, the angrier he became. It also didn't help to have to think so much about Regulus again, whom he had managed to suppress so successfully in the last few weeks. Seeing his face in front of his inner eye, even, and especially in the few good moments they had had together, hurt. So much so that it almost mutated into something like grief. Almost.

Right then, the fucking letter came. The owl at the window alone seemed to look at him ruefully as she delivered it. Sirius accepted it, turning the envelope back and forth, considering for a very long time whether he even wanted to open it. Finally, painful curiosity won out.

Hey Padfoot,

I know you don't want to see me right now. I know you don't want to hear or read anything from me either. And I've always respected your boundaries so far. But I can't do nothing now, I'm sorry.

I regret not telling you sooner. More than you can imagine. We swore we'd never keep secrets from each other. You always told me everything, even about your family and all the terrible things that happened to you. You don't deserve me trampling on your trust like this.

I have no regrets about Regulus, though, even though it's hard to write that to you. It was always my dream that you would talk to each other someday and understand that you are both wonderful people. You two always had so much love in you, so much good. You were both just victims of your family. Regulus, unlike you, was never strong enough to escape it.

That he is now dead, without having shown the world who he really was, hurts more than I can put into words. The guilt will stay with me forever.

But you are still my brother, Sirius, always will be. Please, give me another chance to meet you. Lily needs me, there's no way I'm leaving her. But I can't go into hiding either, knowing this is how it is between us.

Please, Sirius, talk to me.

Please.

James

Sirius crumpled up the letter as soon as he finished reading it.

Fuck you, James Potter, was the only thing that rang through his head, loudly.

It hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Don’t Dance' by Pretty Pink, Mark V

:(

Chapter 37: Because Of You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If I know what love is,

it is because of you.

February 29, 1976

Sorry, I've been writing almost exclusively about Sirius lately. But I have a few things going through my head right now and I feel like I can only openly write about them here. Bear with me a bit longer, I'm sure it'll pass soon.

***

It was still dark when Remus woke up. A gloomy, rainy March morning, hopeless and depressing. Sirius was already gone, early shift. His side of the bed was cold.

It took Remus an unusually long time to get up. He had been having jumbled dreams, a mixture of memories and strange fantasies, just like the last few weeks. Nothing more than blurry smudges had remained of them, but most of the time they still left a squeezing feeling in his chest. Today it was especially bad.

He trotted into the bathroom and showered. Afterwards, in front of the mirror, he dried his hair with the towel. It was almost back to its old length by now, at least one thing that was getting back to normal while everything else around him was going down the drain. Sighing, he hung up his towel. He didn't want to think about it.

The strategy of not thinking usually worked better when he had something to do or someone around. So it would be a long morning.

He ate breakfast and even read the Daily Prophet that Sirius had put on the table earlier. There was nothing of importance there, nothing about Voldemort's grand plan, nothing about a prophecy. Nothing about how any day now could be the Order's last. That any day with Sirius could be the last.

Remus put the paper down. *Don't think.* In Voldemort's presence, that was so easy. When he was with him, everything was right, everything made sense. But here, alone, the patter of the rain in his ears, sometimes it didn't. Which worried him.

In a rush of energy, he hurried upstairs to his old room and pulled his potions from the dresser. He took the potion for his dark mark, but unfortunately it still didn't help against the unpleasant tingling he had been feeling for weeks. He also took a sip of the pain potion as a precaution, even though he hadn't had a headache for a while. Just in case.

Before he left the room again, he grabbed the diary and tucked it under his arm. If he had nothing to do, he might as well torture himself through a few illegible lines. Even though he already had more memories than he could handle.

Just as he arrived downstairs, the phone rang. Remus threw the diary onto the couch and looked at the clock, frowning.

"Yes?", Remus eventually answered it, curtly.

"Moony, glad I caught you," Remus heard James's rushed voice.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"No, not exactly... I just wanted to call... about the Sirius thing, you know"

"At eight in the morning?" Remus didn't feel like talking to James about the topic, not after spending the last few days painstakingly trying to cheer Sirius up somehow.

"Yes, look, it's quite urgent unfortunately." Short pause. "Actually, I'd rather discuss it with you on the spot, could I drop by for a minute? Noticed Sirius is on shift at the moment..."

Remus suppressed a sigh.

"Sure, come over."

It wasn't five seconds before James was standing at his door. He looked a little overtired, but then again, that was nothing new in the Order of the Phoenix.

"Thanks for listening."

Remus shrugged, not having the energy right now to pretend something he didn't feel. "Come in."

James took off his jacket and shoes and walked purposefully to the dining room table. Remus followed him a little hesitantly.

"Do you want sonething to drink?"

James shook his head and Remus sat down opposite him, leaning back waitingly, arms folded. James's gaze darted back and forth between him and the tabletop.

"I know I fucked up. It was the worst possible timing. I didn't want it to come out like that."

I really don't give a shit, Remus thought wearily. He had so much other stuff on his mind, stuff that was so much more important, so much heavier.

"He'll come to terms with it eventually. You've got to give him time. It's only logical that he's so upset. He hated his brother."

James nodded in surrender.

"I understand that too. The problem is that I don't have that much time left and I need Sirius for something. Dumbledore is pushing me to wrap everything up."

"What do you have to do?"

James fussed. "Well, actually, I'm not supposed to talk to anyone else about it..."

Remus moistened his lips. "Come on, you can tell me."

James was obviously thinking about his words, his gaze wandering towards the ceiling.

"You're right, Moony," he finally said, leaning forward. "I suppose it's about a prophecy."

"Oh? What kind?"

"Something that will probably pin Voldemort on our arses if he ever finds out about it. Dumbledore wants to get ahead of that and has chosen a super safe place for us. Plus he has a spell, one that will make it impossible to find us. However, it requires a ... he calls it a 'Secret Keeper'."

"Okay, and what is that exactly?"

"In that person, the spell is sealed, so to speak. Only through them you can find out the true location. They would have to reveal it. So if you have someone you can trust 100%, you're safe."

Remus subconsciously touched the bald spot above the back of his neck. "And you're going to ask Sirius to do that?"

"Actually, yes." James snorted in resignation. "But I think I really fucked that up."

"Yeah." There was nothing to sugarcoat about that. "But just wait and see. It'll be fine."

James looked worried. "I don't think I can wait much longer, Moony."

"How long is Dumbledore going to let you talk to him?"

"I have to beg for every week and it's already making me feel super guilty. I don't want to put Lily and the baby in unnecessary danger."

Now Remus did have to comment again. "What the hell possessed you to bring up that topic anyway? You've only made life harder for yourself unnecessarily."

James shook his head, routinely, as if it wasn't the first time he'd heard that phrase.

"You wouldn't understand."

Probably not. But maybe Regulus could explain it to him the next time he confronted him.

"What's your plan now?" asked Remus, tilting his head.

"I wish I knew," James took a deep breath and then looked at Remus pleadingly. "I'll do everything I can to make him forgive me. However, if that doesn't work, Moony... would you...?"

Remus's insides tightened painfully. "What are you saying?"

"Would you then become our Secret Keeper? Lily and I have agreed that it should be one of you two. You are the ones we trust the most."

"That... honours me, of course," Remus pressed out.

"So you would?"

It suddenly felt like someone had put Remus on the stretching bench. There was a relentless tug on him from two sides. Any moment now it would tear him apart, any moment now he would collapse.

"...Of course." Those words silenced the chaos inside him. But the silence was many times worse. Remus felt dizzy.

James beamed. "Thank you Moony. That really means a lot to us. And it puts my mind at ease a little."

Remus smiled woodenly. "That's the important thing."

James nodded again, his glow fading bit by bit. "Did he actually get my letter?"

"Yes. He read it, too."

"And how did he react? Good or bad?"

Remus looked out the window where the rain was getting heavier, thick drops pattering dully against the glass.

"He barricaded himself in the bedroom for a couple of hours. Don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing for you."

James lowered his head. "Really fucking bad."

Then they lapsed into silence. Remus thought feverishly about how to get James out of the flat as quickly as possible. He wanted to be alone, badly.

Luckily, it didn't take any initiative on his part, because the next thing James did was take a deep breath and rise from his chair.

"About time for me. I'll get back to you." He turned to leave. "Thank you for your time. And sorry for all the drama."

This wasn't even the beginning.

"No problem at all."

***

He didn't know how it happened, but not ten minutes after James's disappearance, Remus was back at the dining room table with the photo album open in front of him. Maybe that was his desperate attempt to stop himself from thinking, maybe it was something else. He couldn't tell. He felt strange. His stomach was squeezing, his right leg was restlessly bobbing up and down, he was far too warm. These were sensations like just before the full moon.

The pictures of his friends did not necessarily make it any better. Some were quite entertaining, especially the unflattering ones of himself. Most of the others, however, only increased his discomfort. He got stuck on one picture of Lily and James. It was probably from seventh year. You could tell they hadn't been together then, both keeping a polite distance from each other. Still, they grimaced together, good-humoured, perhaps a little drunk.

You took that picture, Remus, I don't know if you remember. It was on your 18th, man, that was a wild night. I think that was the first picture of Lily and me together. Even though I'm super fond of it, I want you to have it. It was just one of many beginnings you've been a part of. I hope you'll always be by our side in all the next steps too!

He frantically turned the page, landing on a picture of Sirius and James in their Quidditch uniform, half-hugging, bending over from laughing. Somehow, seeing Sirius in that very moment made everything much worse. Remus felt his stomach turn. He slammed the album shut, turning it so he couldn't see the photo on the front either. Okay, James, Lily and especially Sirius seemed to be a very bad subject at the moment.

But why? Why aren't you happy, you stupid fuckung idiot?, something inside him hissed. *Voldemort will kiss your feet if you become Secret Keeper and serve him James and Lily on a silver platter. Then this whole ordeal will finally be over!*

He needed a cigarette.

***

Around noon he found himself lying on the couch, one leg over the back, his head leaning way over the edge. Part of him wanted to get up and run a marathon, another wanted to lie lethargically like that forever. Smoking didn't help, neither did sleeping. He wanted ...

Yes, what did he want?

What the hell was his fucking problem?

He straightened up, swung his legs off the couch and pressed his hands to his face. Rubbed his eyes, his temples, everything. Would fresh air help?

Against what, anyway?

He tore open all the windows on the ground floor, let it rain into the living room, soon stood there shivering in his thin shirt. It didn't help either. His body just wouldn't calm down.

He could hardly describe it. Maybe this was what it felt like to be on the verge of a panic attack, or a nervous breakdown. The body was preparing for something, incubating something, sending alarm signals that Remus couldn't interpret. It was enough to nearly drive him crazy.

Frantically he put on a record, and as *You Really Got Me Now* by the Kinks boomed through the room he thought about what else he could try. His eyes fell on the diary, which was lying on the coffee table. It was probably a shit idea too, but he was running out of alternatives. Maybe the children's scrawl would demand so much concentration from him that he could think of nothing else.

He picked up the well-worn book, weighed it in his hands for a while before flipping it open and taking out his makeshift bookmark. It started off pleasantly inconsequential already, with some summer story at Peter's family's house. It actually helped a little, Remus hardly believed it. It lulled him into safety, made him careless.

The punishment for that followed promptly.

November 4, 1976

I have a big problem.

I've fallen in love with Sirius.

Remus's eyes widened. Something ran through him, painfully, unyieldingly. But he couldn't stop reading.

I know, it's bad. And the worst thing is, I think, it happened quite a while ago. But it's only really dawned on me now. Saw him making out with a girl at the party yesterday, and I swear it felt like someone stabbed me. I didn't think I could feel like that. He's all I can think about.

Mum, I wish you could have gotten to know him. He's the best person I've ever met. He's so funny, so charismatic and he's always there when I need him. I can't imagine my life without him anymore. I just wouldn't survive it.

He doesn't feel that way about me, I know that. He probably never will and that's okay.

I'll get over it, eventually. It'll be horrible. But if that's what it takes to stay by his side, I'll gladly put up with it.

I just wanted to say it once, or maybe twice.

I love him.

It took Remus several attempts to read the last lines, which at one point made him rub his eyes in frustration. Something dripped onto the paper, smudging the black ink. For a confused second, he thought a raindrop had strayed in from outside. But when, without premonition, he was shaken by a stifled sob, he realised.

Horrified, he ran his hands over his face and then looked at his palms, at the tears dripping and running down them. There were more and more, it wouldn't stop. Overwhelmed, Remus put the diary aside and

wiped his face with his shirt. But a few seconds later it was wet again.

The A-side of the record had run through in the meantime, the needle only scratched quietly. The pattering, heavy rain was still coming through the open window. It was just loud enough to mask the quiet sobs inside.

***

"What are you doing, Moony?"

Sirius looked at him like he was insane when he found him sitting on the balcony, in the middle of the rain, soaking wet and completely calm.

"Clearing my head for a bit," Remus said with a smile, feeling the rain run down his face. Thankfully, it was only rain now. At least that extended cold shower had served its purpose.

"You've gone completely mad," Sirius stated, shaking his head, but joined him on the balcony anyway. He raised his wand and made an invisible umbrella appear above him, shielding him from the thick drops.

"Do you want to get under it too?"

"I think that ship has already sailed."

"But then you can smoke better."

The next moment Sirius was already holding a cigarette out to him. That convinced him. He slid a little towards Sirius under the umbrella and accepted it.

"How was the shift?" he asked after the first two drags. The nicotine, as always, was like a cosy little blanket on his nerves.

"Was okay. No incident thankfully. Vented about Dumbledore and Moody with Sturgis."

"Understandable."

"Oh yeah." Sirius inhaled deeply and looked at Remus searchingly.

"And what about you? Do you want to talk about it?"

It sounded strange to hear that sentence come out of Sirius's mouth for a change. And he couldn't think of anything worse than putting what was going on inside him into words and saying it out loud.

He waved it off, lightly. "Oh, it's all right. Just felt like my head was bursting earlier. Needed some refreshment."

"Oh, very interesting. Some people might drink a glass of water and air out the room. But that didn't occur to you?"

"That wasn't enough."

Sirius looked at him silently. He looked tired, as he always did after early shifts. But that didn't do anything to his face. Remus had the sudden urge to touch it.

"What are you looking at? Do I have something there?" Sirius hastily stroked his cheeks and Remus shook his head.

"No, no. There's nothing. Sorry."

With lowered gaze he waited until Sirius had finished smoking and stubbed out the cigarette. Even this small gesture he made look elegant, it was the first time Remus noticed it. He stubbed out his own cigarette, which he had barely taken a drag on, and couldn't help but look at Sirius again. Finally he surrendered to the overwhelming urge and closed the distance between them.

"Oi!" exclaimed Sirius before Remus kissed him. "You're ... soaking wet," he squeezed out from between their lips, a little more softly. Still, he returned the kiss.

"I'm sorry," Remus repeated, not meaning it. He clung to Sirius, to his warmth. Only now did he realise how cold he was.

Sirius melted into the kiss, sighing as if a great weight was falling from him too. It wasn't long before he lowered his wand, dropped it to the floor and wrapped his arms around Remus. A gush of water doused them, reaching into the deepest layers of clothing. Remus didn't care. And Sirius didn't complain any more either.

Kissing Sirius like that made Remus lose all sense of time. Everything

else lost meaning. It was only when he noticed Sirius beginning to tremble that he hesitantly broke away from him.

"We should go inside," he suggested, stroking Sirius's cheek where his scar ran.

Sirius, his gaze a little clouded, smiled. "Good idea."

They decided to shower together. For Remus, it was in some ways his third shower of the day, but he craved it nonetheless and heaved a sigh of relief as the hot water ran over his shivering limbs.

Their shower wasn't particularly large, so Sirius stood close to him, which didn't bother Remus in the slightest. They picked up where they had left off on the balcony, kissing passionately and Remus enjoying feeling Sirius's soft skin under his fingers without the pesky clothes between them.

"Are you sure you're okay?" asked Sirius at one point, when he managed to pull away a few inches.

Remus nodded blissfully. "Yes."

More than that.

He wrapped one arm around Sirius's waist and pressed him even closer, stroking his wet, slightly curly hair with his other hand.

And he looked at him, for what felt like eternities, because he just couldn't help himself. There he was. The person the old Remus had watched from afar for years and loved so hopelessly. In his arms, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. As if he belonged nowhere else. Warmed his insides, even more than any hot water could.

"You're beautiful," Remus whispered, caressing his face.

Sirius smiled nervously and pulled his shoulders up shyly. "Oh nonsense."

"It's true," he said emphatically and began to litter his face with kisses, his nose, his forehead, his cheeks, his lips, his scar, his chin. Then he kissed his way down Sirius's neck, pushing his wet hair aside, and felt Sirius sigh comfortingly against his shoulder and tilt his head to the side.

"So beautiful," Remus breathed between kisses, repeating it like a mantra. Even as Sirius's sighing eventually grew louder, his body responding to the touch and his knees going weak, Remus never tired of whispering it in his ear, insistently, pleadingly. Maybe he was trying to get Sirius to believe him one day.

Or maybe it was just his broken, twisted way of saying 'I love you'.

Because he loved Sirius.

And that realisation hurt more than any torture could.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Narziss und Goldmund/Narcissus and Goldmund (a.k.a. Death and the Lover)' by Hermann Hesse

I had this chapter in mind from the beginning. Never thought I'd make it this far in the fic though, honestly. :D Very glad I did.

We're slowly nearing the end of act 2, only a few more chapters to go! I'm very excited and very anxious.

See ya!

Chapter 38: Scapegoat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You are not my enemy

I'll let you prove me wrong

"Phew... you do know you can open the windows in here?" Remus asked disgustedly as soon as he came through the frontdoor.

Regulus only casually noted his arrival, staring intently into his cauldron where the crucial phase for his invisibility potion had just begun.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Regulus impatiently shooed him towards the couch with a wave of his hand.

"Nah, sit down. Wait."

He saw Remus follow his instruction out of the corner of his eye. He concentrated on dumping in the right number of eel eyes in the right cadence. Then he stirred twice counterclockwise and thrice clockwise, waited a minute and repeated the same again. Now he had at least 30 minutes.

"Good to see you," he said, hearing his back crack as he straightened up.

He sat down by Remus and saw that there were two large new scars running down his neck.

"Oh, from last full moon?" He pointed to the reddened areas.

"Yeah, day before yesterday. Was really bad again."

"Why don't you just go into the forest? I mean, nobody's forcing you to

sit in that shitty cellar dungeon."

"Too dangerous. If I don't have someone to keep me in check, I'm too unpredictable at the moment."

Regulus couldn't quite understand the thinking. But then, it wasn't his body that was being disfigured.

"What else is going on? What do you hear from the Order and Voldemort?"

Remus groaned in annoyance, leaning back in the couch and resting his head on the backrest. "Far too much. I don't want to talk about it. It's all fucked up."

"Maybe I can help."

Remus tilted his head in his direction and smiled resignedly.

"I doubt it."

"Try."

Remus rubbed his eyes. "Voldemort wants to kill Lily and James because of some windy prophecy. He wants me to get their whereabouts for him. After that, he wants to wipe out the rest of the Order as well."

"Oh okay," Regulus said, watching Remus closely. His hunched shoulders, his tense jaw, his restless leg. "But that was just 'a matter of time', wasn't it? What's the problem?"

Remus leaned forward and seemed to cringe for a moment, then propped his elbows on his knees and gripped his forehead with one hand, massaging his temples with his thumb and index finger.

"Reg," he whispered, desperate. "I can't do this."

Regulus's eyes widened. Instantly his hands became shaky.

"Can't do what, Remus?"

Say it. Say it. Say it out loud.

Remus hesitated, rubbing his temples frenetically, as if to reassure himself.

"I can't kill Sirius. And I can't kill Lily and James either, I can't do that to him."

"Why?" Regulus's voice sounded neutral. His best acting. Because inside he was almost bursting.

For a while Remus said nothing, barely stirring either. But then he put his hand down, turned to Regulus, bent far forward as if he were in pain. His gaze was sad and heavy.

"Because I love him."

A thunderstorm of various emotions washed over Regulus, but he tried to not let them show. This could be it. This could be his chance. It seemed like Remus had finally reached the point where Regulus could push him in the right direction. If he played it smart, maybe Remus would actually...

"This is bad," he stated for now, which made Remus wince.

"I know. And no one can know. Under no circumstances."

"Yes, they would doubt your loyalty. Voldemort would withdraw his trust in you."

Remus nodded, his eyes widening in fear. Fuck, Regulus hadn't thought he'd ever see such emotion in his face again. It was more than he'd ever dreamed of. And the sight made him wet his lips and take the next step.

"*Are* you still loyal to Voldemort, then?" He leaned forward waitingly, taking in every little movement.

The uncertainty became even more obvious. Remus straightened up, rubbed his hands over his thighs and seemed to search for an answer in vain. Regulus's heartbeat fastened.

"I... uh," Remus began hoarsely, and it sounded so helpless that it was enough for Regulus. Heart pounding wildly, he put a hand on Remus's shoulder. It was now or never.

"It's okay, you know?" He swallowed. "'Cause I for one... am not either."

Remus stared at him like a ghost. "What?"

Hopefully he wasn't making a colossal mistake with this.

"You heard me." Regulus sounded more confident than he felt. "Why do you think I'm here and not in Grimmauld Place anymore?"

"Wait a minute," Remus put in, but Regulus didn't let him continue.

"I know what's going on inside you. I went through it too." He looked at Remus urgently. "And believe me, once it starts, it doesn't get better."

Remus continued to stare at him, uncomprehending. "What are you planning here?"

He didn't want to say at first, the danger too great. But something in him and something in Remus's eyes made him take the risk.

"Remus, Voldemort must be stopped."

Remus shot up, backing away a few steps, shaking his head. "Are you kidding me? Are you completely out of your mind? Y-you're a..."

"Traitor? If you want to call it that, sure," Regulus said lightly. He had practised perfect indifference all his life for moments like this. He rose as well, equally overcoming the distance Remus was trying to establish. Oh, how the tables could turn.

"Think what you will of it, but know that Voldemort will not rest until every single member of the Order is dead. If you want to continue to be loyal at all costs, then say goodbye to... "

"The Order *must* be destroyed!" he rumbled, clenching his fists. It sounded as if it had been memorised. "These rats are trying to stop us from creating a better future!"

"So Sirius is a rat? Lily, James, Peter and Mary too?" Regulus raised his voice now too, needing his full concentration to keep it from cracking. "You've known them for over a year now! Is that what rats look like to you?"

Remus contorted his face angrily, took a step towards Regulus in surprise and pointed his index finger at him. "You swore to serve him! How can you stab us in the back like that?"

"Because I realised what we're doing here, Remus! And I *know* you've realized it, too! We're nothing but a bunch of murderers!"

Remus grabbed him by the collar of his shirt without warning and

pushed him against the nearest wall, just as he had done back in the hallway right before breaking Evan's nose. Regulus feared he was in for a similar fate.

"Watch your mouth," he hissed angrily, but in his eyes Regulus saw fear. Was this the shot animal at his last rebellion?

"You know I'm right." Where did he get this courage, anyway? He could barely breathe under Remus's vice grip.

"I should take you away right now," he continued to nag. "Throw you at Voldemort's feet before you can cause any more harm."

"Go ahead." Regulus smiled and suppressed his urge to cough. "Might as well take Sirius with you while you're at it. The few days back or forth won't make any difference, will they?"

Remus looked like he was going to punch him at any moment. But then, a disgusted expression on his face, he shoved him forcefully into the wall again and then let go of him. Regulus slumped, grabbed his neck and took a deep breath.

"And you expected me to help you? How stupid can you be?" He looked down contemptuously at Regulus and then turned away. "Tomorrow morning you will be gone from this hut, I don't want to see you again. And if you so much as try anything against Voldemort, I will kill you myself."

Fuck.

"I know it's hard." Regulus cleared his throat. "Especially for you. You don't know anything else. But you're more than that, I can tell. You don't even want this."

Remus, already halfway to the door, grumbled. "You don't have a clue about what I want."

Regulus took a deep breath. This was his last chance.

"Did you know I was there, back then? Just before Voldemort did all that to you?"

Remus paused, hesitant. But he didn't turn, didn't say anything.

"I held your hand. You begged me to kill you. Because the thought of working for Voldemort was worse than death for you. Because you

knew what a monster he was. And because your friends meant too much to you."

There was silence. A drawn out, almost unbearable silence.

"That doesn't matter anymore," he said finally, his head down. "The old me died. He doesn't exist anymore. What he thought or felt has absolutely nothing to do with me."

"Oh, is that so?" said Regulus in a rough voice. "Then it's pure coincidence that you've fallen in love with the same man twice? And that you come to me, completely desperate, because you don't want to kill him? Is that meaningless, too?"

"You don't understand anything," Remus said curtly, and a second later he was gone from the hut. The door slammed shut, for good. Regulus pressed a hand to his face and groaned in annoyance.

Remus was right. He didn't understand.

***

The situation was not optimal, to put it mildly. It was a complete fucking disaster, to put it realistically.

Regulus had miscalculated. He had thought that Remus's love for Sirius would be enough to convince him. At least, to make him doubt. Had he imagined his insecurity after all? Had he read too much into it? Had he blown all his chances now?

He looked around the hut, somewhat perplexed. In the last few months he had settled in wonderfully here, had accumulated books, potions, maps, had followed his first tracks, had really made some progress. If Remus really wanted him out of here, how was he going to do it? He would never get it all packed up by the morning. Apart from that, he had no clue where else to go.

He briefly toyed with the idea of just staying here and waiting to see what happened. But he had already witnessed what it was like to incur Remus's wrath and there were a lot of things Regulus would rather experience. So he didn't have much choice but to start packing.

He toiled into the night. Worked with reduction spells, packed everything into the box Kreacher had given him. There was easily room for everything in it, but it was still frustrating work. Where the hell was he going to find a place to unpack all this again? It would set him back weeks in his planning. And all because he had thought, because he'd been an idiot to believe, that there was even an ounce of humanity left in that bloody asshole....

An aggressive knock made him flinch. He looked at the clock, 03:08. Hastily he drew his wand, but otherwise tried to keep as quiet as possible.

He held his breath, listening for footsteps or voices, but nothing like that. A few seconds passed. Then, without further warning, the door slammed open. And standing before him again, tall, menacing and far to early, was Remus.

Fucking great.

Although that entrance made shivers run down Regulus's spine, he didn't let that show on his face.

"Why are you back already? You said I had until morning to leave. I'm not done packing."

Remus stared at him and then past him into the hut, which he had already almost emptied. He was sweaty and breathing heavily as if he'd been running through the woods.

"Hey!" hissed Regulus, a unyielding tightness in his chest. "Do you hear what I'm saying? I still need time!"

Remus's gaze darted to him, impossible to interpret in the semi-darkness. Still, it lay heavy on Regulus.

"How are you going to do it?"

"Excuse me?" Regulus's head jerked forward.

"How are you planning to stop Voldemort?"

"Huh?" He began to walk slowly backwards. "What the hell? You think I'm stupid enough to tell you that now?"

Remus didn't follow him into the hut, stopping at the entrance, his

face in shadow.

"How are you going to hold your own against him?" he continued, as if he hadn't heard his words. "He is one of the most powerful wizards in the world. We can do nothing against him."

We.

Regulus stopped.

"Remus, what do you want?" he repeated, his voice occupied. He clutched the wand in his hand so tightly it hurt.

"I want to know what I might be getting myself into."

Regulus wondered if he had fallen asleep while packing and was dreaming.

"Are you trying to trap me?"

Regulus couldn't remember ever being so confused by a person's intentions. It didn't suit Regulus. He always saw through others. But Remus was just too complex for him.

"I don't know," Remus replied dryly. Well, at least that seemed honest.

Regulus shook his head in disbelief. "You fucking idiot," he muttered, trudging towards the couch. When he sat and noticed that Remus still hadn't moved from the doorstep, he groaned in annoyance. "Are you the bloody devil or what? Do you need three invitations? It's fucking freezing!"

That seemed to snap Remus out of his stupor. Slowly he stepped into the light, closing the door behind him. He looked like shit. Pale, burst veins in his eyes, chapped lips. He must've had a rough few hours.

"I thought about blowing your cover," he said, standing there forlornly, as if he were a first-time guest. "I felt I couldn't let you get away with it."

"And then?"

Remus held both hands to his head. "Sometimes I get so confused. It's like there are two different people inside me wanting two different things."

"What do they want?"

He pressed his lips together. "One wants me to kill you. The other wants me to help you."

"And which one is winning?"

Remus lowered his arms. "Well, you're still alive, aren't you?"

"I guess..."

Silence. Regulus didn't know what else to say for the life of him. In the state Remus was in, he couldn't fully trust him, could he? It could jeopardise the whole plan.

"I know I don't seem particularly trustworthy right now ," Remus took a deep breath. "But... I know I can't go on like this. I didn't want to hear it before, but you were right. I have to pick a side. It's either Voldemort or... or Sirius."

"And you're choosing Sirius?"

Remus looked at him, sadly, defeatedly.

"How could I not?"

That phrase had something so sincere about it, that it really made Regulus reconsider.

"Well, then I hope you always have a picture of him with you," he said, casually putting his legs up on the coffee table. "Because that's what I'm going to shove in your face every time you even think of betraying me from now on."

Remus nodded slowly.

Ah, fuck it, Regulus thought. And let his good faith get the better of him.

***

Finally sharing his plans and everything about the Horkruxes with someone didn't bring the relief Regulus had hoped it would. Not with the way Remus looked at him the whole time, not with his nervousness and his shocked expressions. Regulus didn't know what to

make of them, didn't really know if Remus would really keep his word or stab him in the back the next opportunity he got.

The days that followed were therefore tense. Regulus didn't sleep much, and when he did he dreamed of his family coming to get him, of Voldemort setting the hut in fire, of Remus cursing him in his sleep. There were moments when Regulus was absolutely convinced that Remus had lied to him, that he would kill him for his betrayal. He spent hours scolding himself for his recklessness, for falling victim to Remus's sad look.

But nothing happened. No one came to get him, no one set the place on fire.

And the next time Remus came, he brought some take-out.

"How many of these Horkruxes did Voldemort create?", Remus asked after they had finished eating. He still looked tired and worn out, but not as shitty as before.

Regulus mused. "I don't know exactly. But I suspect at least three. Kreacher has described to me some things he overheard in the last few years. From that I deduce at least two more. But who knows, we both know how he thinks."

"This is like looking for a needle in a haystack. It could be any object."

"I don't think so." Regulus had spent days on that very thought. "It'll be something pompous. Voldemort won't settle for average." He pointed to the medaillon in the sealed chest. "For example, this is Salazar fucking Slytherin's medallion. I don't know where he got that. But that's the style we have to think in. Arrogant, egotistical and a bit megalomaniac."

"And how do you destroy them?"

Regulus sighed resignedly. "That's the most annoying thing about it all. It's virtually impossible."

"Virtually?"

Regulus looked at him, thinking. Remus seemed in a good state of

mind today, harmless, willing to help. This could actually prove a good opportunity.

"Are you in a rush?"

"No", Remus said quietly as he got up and started putting the dishes away. "I'm done for this month. Tomorrow I'll return to Sirius."

"Nice. Cause I could use your help with something."

"Okay," Remus said hesitantly. "With what?"

"Think of it as a little trial by fire for you. In the literal sense of the word."

***

"This is absolutely suicidal."

"Probably." Regulus pulled his cloak tighter around him, trying to get his trembling under control. It was dark and they were still in the middle of nowhere, but no longer in the hut. They were in a cave. And Regulus was already regretting every thought that led him here.

"In here? Are you sure the cave will keep the fire at bay?"

"No, I'm not, you idiot," Regulus grumbled. "There is no manual for the proper use of Fiendfyre. Everyone knows it's life-threatening and stupid."

"And yet here we are," Remus said, far too calm for the situation.

Regulus rolled his eyes.

"You'd best position yourself near the entrance to the cave. If I manage to start the fire, I'll come running out. You must then bring down the ceiling at the right moment and seal the cave. Can you do that?"

"I don't know," Remus said once more far too honestly. "But I can try."

Regulus didn't have a good feeling at all. But he had waited so long for this opportunity. Had gone over it so many times in his mind. And who knew what Remus would be like tomorrow. He might not get this

chance again so soon.

Slowly he walked forward, deeper into the cave. Behind him, he heard Remus moving away, finally coming to a stop a few feet away under the saving exit.

He pulled out his wand. It couldn't be that hard after all. Of course, he also owned a few old, well-worn books that mentioned Fiendfyre. But in that respect they resembled the Horcrux book, for he had found nothing more than general, imprecise drivel about it in them. He had to rely on his estimates and intuition. Not a good starting point for such black magic.

"Are you planning to do anything? Or are you just going to use the cave for reflecting?"

"Shut up," Regulus said calmly, as if he had just told Remus what time it was. He took a deep breath, listened to his breath. Chaos was the goal. But what was the beginning?

He murmured the words from the book, quietly, uncertainly. He didn't know how to move the wand, what posture was best. It showed in the result. Nothing happened.

"The fire won't come if you're afraid of it, Reg. You have to want it."

"It's a curse, not a fucking mood stone. It can't feel emotions."

"Whatever you say. Keep trying."

Regulus didn't understand why Remus was suddenly teasing him like that, but it didn't help the situation one bit.

Exasperated, Regulus kept trying, standing wide-legged, even holding the wand with both hands to give himself more stability. Still nothing.

"You're doing *great*, Regulus." Was there smugness in his voice?

"Listen, if I needed a third-rate quidditch commentator, I would have taken that instead of you. You're most useful when you keep your mouth shut."

"Shall I go and get us some breakfast already? Seems like you need a few more hours."

Regulus would have liked to throw his wand at him, but instead he took the anger and hissed it into the darkness in the form of the spell.

One second. Two seconds. And then it all happened very quickly.

It began with an indefinable cracking sound. Regulus felt the need to cover his ears, but he was afraid of losing control if he let go of his wand. It began to shake, to hum, so violently that Regulus thought it might explode. It began to draw threads, shiny yellow and red. And then the fire came.

He couldn't make it out exactly, it was too much, too big. It was in the shape of some animal as it burst from the tip of his wand and the cave suddenly became as bright as day.

"RUN!" he heard the redundant command from Remus and tried to bring his wand under control. Not a chance. Without much parting pain, he dropped the wand and ran for his life. It was so incredibly hot, he could hardly breathe. The fire monster roared, rose into the air, slammed into the cave ceiling and finally sought the only exit. There were maybe a few seconds left.

Hastily he fumbled in his pockets, grabbed the medallion and threw it blindly over his shoulders, hopefully right into the maw of the fire.

"Do it!" he shouted at Remus, and saw him gesticulating wildly. Regulus turned his head once more and looked at the monster, feeling a fear within him equal to that in the face of the Inferi. Was this his end?

Hectically, he turned again and saw Remus pointing his wand at the ceiling and uttering a blasting curse. Huge chunks erupted and began to fall, ready to crush everything beneath them, to trap everything in the cave forever.

Regulus ran faster than he had ever run in his life. His body was taut to the breaking point, yet he was swept over like a rag doll as rocks crashed into the ground perhaps two feet behind him. A few small stones hit him in the back, but it was no more than a fleeting pain. He slammed to the ground, the momentum pushing him a few more feet before he came to a halt, panting and gasping. The kicked-up dust made him cough chokingly.

"Holy shit!" Remus yelled, coughing as well.

Regulus agreed with him wholeheartedly, but could not yet speak. Had he really just almost died?

"This is the most violent thing I've ever seen." Remus appeared beside

Regulus and held out his hand. "And I have seen dozens of Inferi."

Regulus took a few more seconds, then grabbed it and let himself be pulled to his feet. Everything hurt.

"I have lost my mind," Regulus stated, looking at the sealed entrance. "That was completely insane."

"But did its job after all."

Regulus took a second to let his words sink in. He was still so full of adrenaline that he could hardly realise what they had just done.

"Have you seen it get destroyed?"

Remus nodded. "Went right up in flames."

"Crazy."

"And now we know how to get the fire out of you, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Anger and hatred have always worked wonders for curses." Remus wiped the sweat from his brow and pointed behind him with his thumb. "Shall we go back? You look like you could use a shower."

Regulus just nodded befuzzedly and hesitantly followed Remus, who walked away like nothing had happened.

He had destroyed a bloody Horcrux. Part of Voldemort's soul. Together with Remus. With the evil, hopeless monster that really wasn't a monster at all.

When the realisation eventually set in, with a thud, Regulus paused, leaned forward and pressed his hands to his face. Something built deep inside him, a wave, euphoria, joy, everything he hadn't felt in so long. He let it out, started laughing, loudly, from the bottom of his heart. To Remus, he must have seemed like he'd gone completely insane, but he didn't give a shit.

For the first time, in all this misery, he dared to hope.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Scapegoat' by Sawano Hiroyuki (lyrics) & Yosh

(performing)

Huge progress in this one! But Remus remains unstable...
Next chapter will be up Sunday or Monday! :)

Also: Chapters 64 & 65: ✓

See ya! :*

Chapter 39: Betray Your Friends

Chapter Notes

> I heard Friday is the new Sunday! (And uploading fanfiction the new hot procrastination technique :'))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Betray your friends for me

Bury your dog when no one is looking

Burn what you love, what you hold dear and sacred

Till there's nothing left to hold you,

Till you take off and fade away

Spring came and went, in the midst of all the chaos. Weeks passed while Remus didn't know where his head was.

The balcony slowly but surely became his habitat. Whenever he could and the weather permitted it, he sat there, smoking cigarette after cigarette, alternately trying to dissuade himself from turning Regulus in and storming off on his own to find the Horcruxes. It was very situational, his attitude. When Sirius was with him, or he was thinking of him, he wanted to do everything in his power to protect him. But when Voldemort was with him... things were very different. Constantly, it felt like he was his own worst enemy.

As he sat on the balcony that evening, it was still pleasantly warm, so Sirius had joined him. It wasn't long now until his next mission. Accordingly, it was quiet between them.

"I'm going grocery shopping in the morning, do you need anything?" asked Sirius at some point when the sun had already set and they were shrouded in twilight darkness.

For Remus, this trivial topic was a relief. Grateful for this pause of

thought, he mused, flicking the ash from his umpteenth cigarette today.

"I was thinking we could try recreating Alice's chili sometime. It was great."

"You mean we amateurs can do it even remotely as well?" Sirius sounded mocking.

"We could try."

Sirius smiled. "That'll end in a catastrophe. But fine by me."

"Nice." Remus put his head back and looked thoughtfully at the evening sky. Only a few stars managed to shine through the London light pollution. Sirius was one of them. He gazed at the star for a while, hearing its namesake humming softly to himself. How could he doubt for a moment that he should fight Voldemort? How could he survive in a world where Sirius did not exist?

When the pressure in his chest became too much, he dragged his gaze further to the moon. Increasing, six days to go. The thoughts came to him inevitably, without his having to conjure them. An automatism.

"What do you think about," he said, not averting his eyes from his greatest enemy, "when you look at the moon?"

Sirius's head moved beside him, seeming to follow his gaze.

"Mostly I think about you."

Remus liked the sound of that. Thoughtfully he rubbed his chest.

"It's actually so beautiful. I hate that I'm so scared of it."

He didn't even need a retort to that statement. No one could do anything about it, things were the way they were. He just wanted to say it out loud for once.

Sirius seemed to understand. He did no more than look at the moon with him, the tyrant, the signpost, the memorial. Their hands came together, intertwined.

"I think James called today. I didn't answer though," Sirius murmured eventually.

Remus pressed his lips together. Was it a good idea to do this again

now...?

"Aren't you going to listen to what he has to say?" he said, before his doubts could get too loud.

Sirius sighed in exasperation. "I've listened to enough of him. I don't need to listen to the same phrases ten times."

"And you're still not ready to forgive him?" Remus phrased it casually, but he couldn't even put into words how much he wanted that to happen. It would make a lot of things so much easier.

"Absolutely not."

He sounded so angry, so sure. Remus knew there was nothing to be done.

"Even after all these weeks?" he tried weakly anyway.

Sirius gave him an annoyed sideways glance. "Yeah bloody hell. You all really can't relate to this, but I'm not just putting this away. James will be lucky if I ever forgive him. For now, he should spare me his useless regrets."

Sirius stared gloomily into the growing darkness. "And I wish you'd finally leave me alone with it too. That's between me and James."

Oh, it's so much more, Remus thought bitterly. *Your stubbornness is going to cost us all our heads.*

Still, he let the subject rest. Instead, thought feverishly about how to convey to Lily and James that he could not become a secret keeper, no matter how much James pleaded it.

It was all in vain, in the end.

In the end, he still picked up the phone when James called twice more the next day. Still listened to his pleading voice as he whispered:

"Remus, it's time. Can we meet?"

And after a long silence, still whispered back, "Okay."

***

Until right before, he insistently planned to refuse the Fidelius Charm. To look past James's and Lily's disappointment and thus probably save their lives. But when at some point Dumbledore stood in front of him, with a serious look on his face and his wand raised, the words just wouldn't pass his lips.

Instead, something else roared inside him, an old, biting hatred for this man and everything he stood for. He didn't know how much of it came from himself and how much he owed to Voldemort. But it burned in his veins, made him angry and cruel just long enough to speak the words. And when he had finally learned the address of Lily and James's hiding place, the knowledge sealed deep inside him, he smiled innocently at Dumbledore. And in doing so, felt as if he had won.

It didn't last long, of course. He barely got past Lily and James's grateful and relieved hugs, barely made it home before realisation flooded through him.

Now he was in complete control of their lives.

"Where have you been?" asked Sirius curiously, poking his head out of the kitchen.

"With James and Lily," he answered truthfully. "Said goodbye."

"Hmm," was all Sirius said and disappeared again.

A brief anger flared in Remus, but quickly calmed. Sirius was the least to blame in all of this. Although it would do Remus good not to be angry with himself for a change.

He lay down on his stomach on the couch and tried to calm himself down. Nothing had happened yet. Voldemort didn't know their whereabouts yet. If he played it smart, he wouldn't find out either. Remus just couldn't be alone with him for too long, and Voldemort definitely couldn't ask about it. Remus knew he didn't stand a chance against him.

With this 'plan' he managed to calm down, somehow. At least for a few hours. At least until he lay in bed at night, Sirius breathing gently on his shoulder, and he stared wide awake at the ceiling. Then he could hear the voice very clearly that he had suppressed throughout the day.

They're as good as dead, it said, almost matter-of-factly.

And Remus knew it was right.

***

The next full moon was disastrous. He didn't know exactly what aspect of his problems had been the specific trigger, but he nearly tore himself apart that night. He could barely walk when he extricated himself from the cellar in Grimmauld Place the next morning, and laboriously dragged himself up the stairs.

Upstairs, in the hallway, Narcissa was waiting for him. She resembled a porcelain doll, as always, with her flawless skin and perfectly placed hair. Her eyebrow moved up when she caught sight of him.

"You're bleeding," she noted redundantly, pointing at the narrow track of blood Remus was trailing behind him.

"Oh, you don't say," he grunted, his voice sounding hoarse. His back hurt the worst, it felt like someone had twisted his spine 180 degrees.

"Come along," she said quietly. "I'll take a look."

He had always liked it better when Regulus had tended to his wounds. Though at first he had hated him like the plague, he had at least been able to control his looks and his facial expressions. Narcissa was a good healer, without question. But when her eyes wandered over the scars and towards his bite, Remus saw the distaste in her eyes. It was obvious that she thought he was scum.

"You should take it easy for a day or two," she said, her gaze meeting his fleetingly. "As little movement as possible."

Remus just grumbled. Days like this in Grimmauld Place were always mind-numbing.

"Fits quite well, anyway," Narcissa continued casually. "Bella told me that the Dark Lord wants to see you urgently. I will arrange the meeting for tomorrow." She handed him his shirt and looked at him scrutinisingly. "Any objections?"

"Of course not," Remus croaked, and all at once the pain was

secondary.

***

"Remus Lupin, what a pleasure to see you."

"My lord." Remus tilted his head, trying in vain to block out the static in his ears.

"You can sit down. Bellatrix has already informed me that you have had a difficult full moon."

"Thank you, My Lord." He sat down heavily on the high-backed chair, the very same one he had used a few weeks ago when he had led Voldemort on the trail of Lily and James.

"How have you been?" he asked, caring as a father and settling down as well.

"Fine," Remus said, quietly. "Very well. The Order keeps falling apart." He didn't know if that was the case, but what else could he say.

I know where they are. I have done my job well, my lord. We can finally wipe them out.

He bit his tongue.

Voldemort nodded knowingly. "I know." Then, and Remus saw it in his sinister eyes, he grew abruptly tired of the small talk. He leaned forward, greedy, eyes wide.

"Tell me, have you found out anything?"

Remus felt like he was drowning, though his insides were on fire at the same time.

It was just a question. He could lie, Voldemort would probably even believe him, as much as he trusted him.

But there was nothing, absolutely nothing, at that moment that seemed more impossible than lying to Lord Voldemort. How could he dare? After all he had done for Remus? After all he had made of him, of the worthless half-blood who had been about to waste his useless

life. To someone like *Albus Dumbledore*.

He lost himself in the menacing darkness of Voldemort's eyes, let himself be pulled into the abyss, so deep that there was no turning back. In a horrible way, he felt at home there.

"Godric's Hollow," he said, hearing his voice as if through a thin wall. "James and Lily are hiding in Godric's Hollow."

Their death sentence.

***

Regulus was sitting at his worktable when Remus entered the hut. Half a dozen books were open in front of him, a map hung sideways over the edge of the table and his new wand lay unheeded on the edge, ready to tumble to the floor at the slightest touch.

"Ah, you're just in time, Remus," Regulus said without looking up. "Look at this, I did some reading here regarding the Hogwarts founders..."

"Regulus," was all Remus said. His tone had to be obvious, because instantly Regulus wheeled around, apparent fear on his face.

"What?" he asked, his busyness fizzling into nothing. Remus knew he was afraid of him, of him having backed down and now coming to get him. And Remus had shown once again today that that fear was not unfounded.

"What's wrong?" asked Regulus again when Remus didn't answer. His hand wandered to his new wand, slowly, as if any movement too quickly would be a provocation.

"Don't worry, I promise you're safe," Remus said emphatically. Slowly, Regulus's shoulders slumped.

"Shit, don't scare me like that." He rubbed his forehead. "You're going to put me in my grave."

"I fucked up," Remus pressed out, ignoring Regulus's words. "I fucked up big time."

"What happened?" Regulus leaned against the worktable, folding his arms.

Remus knew there was no flattering way to say this. No version of the story that didn't make him out to be the asshole, the murderer. He closed his eyes.

"I told Voldemort where to find Lily and James."

"Oh... wow, great." There was biting sarcasm in Regulus's voice. "Wonderful."

"I tried to stop it. I really did. But it just didn't work. I can't do anything about Voldemort when he tries."

Regulus was silent for a while, stroking his fingers thoughtfully over his upper arm.

"So what happens now?" he asked casually at one point, as if asking about the plot of a B-movie.

"Voldemort was already planning to attack next week. I managed to persuade him to wait until my next stay because I 'insisted' on accompanying him. Now it will be on the second day after the next full moon."

"So...", Regulus looked up thoughtfully. "On the 30th of June?"

Remus nodded, just hearing the date made his throat tighten.

"And what's going to happen there exactly?"

Regulus really wanted it spelled out though, the bastard. As if that wasn't bad enough for him as it was.

"Well, what do you think? He'll surprise them there at night and kill them. Actually, his target might be just Lily and their unborn child, but I doubt James will let that happen..."

"Child?" asked Regulus haltingly.

"Uh yeah, that's what the prophecy is about. Haven't I told you that yet?"

Regulus put on a grimace that was probably meant to be a pathetic attempt at a smile. "No, haha, but thanks for enlightening me. Good for them."

"Listen", Remus exhaled impatiently, "you don't need to put on a show, I know about you and James."

Remus could watch it all fall from his face. What was revealed underneath was a hint of honest emotion, of truthfulness. The first time Remus had ever caught sight of that. He almost felt like an intruder.

"Excuse me?" Surprise, bewilderment, one last attempt. "What are you talking about?"

"James confessed it to Sirius. Why do you think I've become the fucking secret keeper? They don't talk to each other anymore."

Regulus pressed a hand on his forehead, his eyes wide.

"That's a joke, isn't it?"

"I wish it were, believe me. So, my sincere condolences that James couldn't keep his mouth shut and that you're finding out about all this like that." Remus took a shaky breath. "But I'm begging you, pull yourself together just for now and help me. Because I really don't know what to do."

Remus gave Regulus the time he needed to get his face back under control. He knew he should have brought up the story with James earlier and talked to him about it calmly, like a... like a *friend* would. But right now, it was just all too much.

"Okay," Regulus finally made, and it sounded strained. Suddenly he looked insanely exhausted.

"Yeah," Remus agreed with him. "You can say that again."

Regulus cleared his throat, disengaged his arms from each other and pushed himself off the worktable. Hesitantly, he began to pace back and forth, his eyes fixed on the tops of his feet.

"Then we need to come up with a plan to save them now."

Remus tried to think his way in, to somehow muster the same energy that Regulus had suddenly conjured up. But he couldn't. It was as if panic blocked any clear thought. Maybe it was also because of the small, disgusting part that lurked in the corner of his head and didn't want to find a solution at all.

"The best thing we can do is make sure they're not there on the 30th. So that Voldemort will attack an empty flat."

"And how?" Remus followed Regulus's movements with his gaze. Somehow there was something reassuring about it.

"Well, with a heads up. We'll just let them know that Voldemort is coming."

Remus snorted. "Sure. Best I knock on James's door and tell him in person. Surely won't raise any questions at all."

Regulus shook his head in annoyance. "No, you idiot. Anonymously. By letter or something."

"Their flat is comprehensively protected, no one knows where they are but me. No letters arrive there. They'd know it was from me straight away. And even if it wasn't, as if they'd just trust an anonymous letter. It might as well be a trap to lure them outside."

Regulus mused, continuing to make his rounds in a circle.

"And besides, even if we did warn them and they weren't there that night, wouldn't that in turn make Voldemort suspicious?"

Regulus shook his head. "No... So yes, perhaps. It will certainly raise questions. But Voldemort is such a big fan of yours, it would scratch his confidence a little at most. Above all, some Death Eaters will hear about it in the run-up to the attack, so anyone else could have blabbed. So we shouldn't worry about that too much."

He looked thoughtful. "But how do we get the information to them inconspicuously and yet trustingly...?"

"And quickly, too," Remus added.

Regulus wandered around the circle for two more laps before stopping abruptly. He lifted his head, ran a hand through his hair, then snorted in amusement.

"I think I have an idea."

At that expression, Remus didn't know whether to be relieved or scared.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Verrate deine Freunde/Betray Your Friends' by Provinz (I just realized that you could interpret the 'dog' as Sirius, which makes this even more sad...)

Three more chapters left in this act...

I'll upload these three chapters very close to each other, since chapters 40 and especially 42 are short and in some way accompanying chapter 41. I won't try to predict a day this time, since it's never been accurate so far lol. It won't be very long though, since I almost finished editing them.

Take care!

See ya <3

Chapter 40: Tokyo

Chapter Notes

> Triple upload!! :0
> But actually not really, considering chapter 42 is only around 150 words. Some things though, need to stand on their own...
> Hope you like these chapters! And always remember the last tag of this fic :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And I feel it coming towards me

My body's numb

The end is plain to see

Will you hold my hand when it's upon us?

Or will you paint our death in radiant colours?

Regulus had imagined the Ministry of Magic to be miserable and gloomy these days, but his expectations were exceeded many times over. With all the slumped shoulders, frowning faces and pinched mouths, one could have thought he had landed at a funeral.

The turnstile at the entrance was the most critical part. Regulus had got hold of the hair of a rather respected Ministry employee, but they would probably examine him anyway. Looking for suspicious objects, Imperius brainlessness and, unfortunately, Polyjuice Potion. So he couldn't risk taking anything with him. And therefore had only exactly one hour for his plan.

There was an Auror at the turnstile. He reminded him of the Aurors at the Quidditch stadium, with deep brooding wrinkles and prematurely aged faces. He looked routine in what he was doing, but not at all sloppy. Every look, every grip was spot on. Regulus had to admit he was getting a little restless as the queue in front of him shrank more and more.

"Good morning Mr Huggins," the Auror said sternly but not unkindly as Regulus stood before him.

"Morning," Regulus mumbled somewhat breathlessly. He tried to keep his chin up while looking like he did this every day.

"May I touch you?"

Regulus spread his arms, just as he had observed his predecessors do. "Yes."

The Auror began to pat him down and when he found nothing, he surveyed his wand, that ugly, useless thing.

"Much to do these days?" He handed the wand back to him and began to stare uncomfortably intently into his eyes.

Bloody control questions. Regulus sighed theatrically and tried to hold his gaze. "You can imagine. Getting worse." Did that sound unsuspicious?

For a few uncomfortable moments the Auror looked at him searchingly, his brow furrowed. It made Regulus really uncomfortable. So uncomfortable that he felt the sudden urge to say something, and after a quick glance at the Aurors right hand, had found something.

"How's your wife?" Hopefully that wasn't a big mistake.

The hint of a smile. Regulus would have liked to pat himself on the back.

"She's fine, thank you for asking." He stopped his examination and stepped aside. "Have a nice day."

And with that, he was through. That had gone better than he'd thought. There really was a reason Regulus was doing this and not Remus.

Without wasting any more precious time, he gathered up his stuff and hurried to the lift. He tried to remember what Remus had told him. Department of Magical Transportation. Sixth floor. Somewhere there he was.

Once on the sixth floor, he had to take a moment to orient himself. The department wasn't particularly large, two long corridors running parallel, with a short connecting piece in the middle. Heavy brown

doors lined the sides, with small signs next to them listing office number, sub-department and name.

Briskly, Regulus trudged along the corridor, searching the signs. He went to the end of the corridor, but did not find anything. Tensely, he looked at his watch. Only a good half hour left. He hurriedly walked back to the middle of the corridor and scurried through the glazed connecting piece.

Once on the second corridor, Regulus repeated his approach, first searching one half of the corridor and then, when he still couldn't find anything, the other. About halfway down, a young woman with dark curls approached him and smiled at him in wonder. "Oh, Mr Huggins? What brings you here?"

Regulus waved it off, his eyes already on the last remaining offices.

"Oh, here on personal business. Nothing big."

"I see," the woman said hesitantly. "Well... have a nice day!"

"You too."

It was the penultimate office, on the right. The sign said in curved black letters:

Room 632

Department of Magical Transport

Portkey Office

Mr Peter Pettigrew

Regulus took a deep breath and pulled the heavy folder from the depths of his cloak. Then he adjusted his collar and knocked carefully.

"Come in," he instantly heard Peter's unmistakable voice. Before he could hesitate, he pushed down the handle.

"Good morning Mr Pettigrew," he began immediately, closing the door behind him. The office was quite small, with room for only two desks, one of which was unoccupied. On the right side, through slightly

smudged windows, you could see an adjoining room filled to the ceiling with junk. All portkeys, Regulus guessed.

"How can I help you, Mr Huggins?"

Fuck, why did *everyone* know him?

"I wanted to request a portkey for next Friday."

"Okay, purpose, time period and size required?" asked Peter routinely, dipping his quill into the ink.

"Um." Regulus cleared his throat. "Friday from 08:00 to 18:00, preferably not that big, so it's easy to transport. Purpose... I want to go on a hiking trip to the Highlands with two friends."

Regulus surprised himself every time with how much rubbish he could make up on the spot.

Peter's pen scratched across the application form.

"Three people, you say?"

"Exactly." He positioned his folder strategically on the far edge of the table and watched Peter blamelessly as he filled out the form. A quick glance at the clock, however, made the tension jump. 22 minutes to go.

"Yes, so currently we have enough portkeys available, so you can get one for that period," Peter said in his monotone civil servant singsong. Regulus nodded impatiently at that.

"You can pick it up here the night before and it will activate automatically at the designated time. Do you have any other questions?"

"No, thank you," Regulus said with a smile. "Sounds good."

"All right," Peter turned the form around so Regulus could see it. "Then I just need a signature down here."

"Very well," Regulus said overzealously, throwing himself forward and knocking the folder off the table with a well-aimed elbow strike. The clasp in the middle was unfixed, so the momentum flipped the folder open and scattered the myriad papers halfway across the office.

"Oh, no, I'm so silly!" Regulus exclaimed, and he smacked his forehead

allusively with his hand, an apologetic look on his face.

Peter cringed as the folder landed on the floor with a loud thud, but then put on a mild, indulgent smile. "Oh, it's no big deal. It happens to me all the time too."

Regulus got completely into the role of the embarrassed man in his mid-forties and began to frantically pick up all the papers from the floor. He didn't even know what was on half of them, he had just stuffed in random pages of books and newspapers. In the end, it was really only about one piece of paper anyway.

While Regulus refilled his folder, he searched through the rest of the layer of notes and saw the yellowed, conspicuous piece of paper peeking out from under an old report from the Daily Prophet. He took the report down and inconspicuously slid the slip of paper half under Peter's desk before fishing up the rest and rising breathlessly.

"I'm really sorry about that!" said Regulus, lacing up his folder again. Peter waved it off. "As I said, no harm done." Checking, he then looked at the floor, causing Regulus's tension to rise abruptly.

"So yeah, uh." In the speed of light he put a made up signature and was half out of the room the next moment. "Thank you very much, I have to be on my way then!"

"Uh, wait! I think you forgot something!" Out of the corner of his eye, Regulus saw Peter lift the yellowed piece of paper, but by then he was already out of the office, pretending to be overcome by a fit of deafness.

Nervously, he looked at the clock. Fifteen minutes. He had to leave immediately.

To avoid Peter catching up to him, he covered the distance to the lift by running, no matter how stupid that looked. When he was finally in the lift, he allowed himself to take his first breath. The bait was at least in place.

The lift ride that followed, however, proved to be very nerve-wracking. They stopped at every floor, the oldest, slowest wizards and witches limped in and partially blocked the doors. Regulus was on the verge of freaking out.

When he finally got back to the main hall, he had less than five minutes left. He didn't dare run here, it looked too much like escaping,

but he certainly set the next world record for walking in the 300 yards to the entrance.

"Where do you want to go already, Mr Huggins?" asked another stupid employee, but Regulus didn't slow down one bit.

"Hasty appointment!" was all he shouted, turning his head to the side as he realised his face was beginning to tingle.

Fortunately, no one else got in his way. There was no turnstile to the outside, carelessly, and so he managed to escape into one of the phone boxes just in time. On the way up, he was already shrinking.

"Did it work?" greeted Remus as he arrived breathlessly at their meeting place two blocks away. Gregory Huggins countenance had left him entirely and his wide cloak hung down on him like a sack.

"Guess so," Regulus panted heavily, propping himself up on his knees. "Was a close call, though."

"You met Peter? And he got the letter?"

"Yes, he did," he repeated. "Now he just has to read it."

"I'm sure he will, he's far too curious for that."

"Do you think he'll be able to do anything with it?"

Remus nodded. "Yeah, sure. Peter's not stupid. My only worry is that they won't take it seriously. Or worse, somehow will still immediately get on my trail."

"We'll see," was all Regulus said and began to change. Remus shoved the bag of his clothes at him and looked tense.

"It'll be fine," Regulus tried to reassure him further. "They won't suddenly suspect you. They trust you far too much."

"I don't know about that," Remus muttered, looking down at the ground.

"Yes, there's always a risk... but it's either that or their death on your conscience, Remus. And that should be an easy pick."

"That's true..." Remus touched the back of his neck. "Come on, we

need to bring Huggins his clothes back, before he wakes up."

"Don't worry, he'll sleep for at least another hour." Regulus knew his potions. But to not stress Remus even more he picked up the pace and stuffed the old-fashioned clothes back into the bag. After that, they quickly made their way.

"But I'm telling you, you should have seen me in there." Regulus unpacked his most pompous voice while walking, trying to lighten the mood. "It was the role of a lifetime."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, I keep thinking that I really should have become an actor."

"I could see that as well." A small smile stole onto Remus's lips. It was at least a start.

***

Hello, G.H.

There is news.

The great prophecy will come to its end. The Dark Lord is getting ready.

Fidelius was a problem, but we found a way around it, even without knowing the S.K.. All thanks to the immeasurable wisdom of the Lord.

Once again he has shown us that his pure, dark magic really has no limits.

June 30th, sunset, Godric's Hollow. Join us.

May the Dark Lord lead us into a glorious future!

I.K.

***

Regulus received a letter from Remus, two days later. It was only a few words:

I think it might have worked.

Regulus wished Remus had come out with a little more detail, but at least it was better than nothing.

Maybe that vague warning was enough to save James's and Lily's lives for the time being. That was all Regulus wanted.

At least James had to live long enough for Regulus to kick his ass.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Tokyo' by ARS LATRANS Orchestra

Really had fun with this chapter. Was a nice break from all the tension!

But take a deep breath now. The angst is coming...

Chapter 41: Amour

Chapter Summary

Catastasis

Chapter Notes

CWs Violence, Blood, Mental Distress

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Love is a wild animal

It bites and scratches and kicks at me[…]

Eats me up with skin and hair

And chokes me out again after day and year

Lets itself fall soft as snow

First it gets hot then cold at the end it hurts

The time until the end of June was probably the worst of Remus's life so far. The waiting, the uncertainty, the chaos. He just wanted it to end.

At least the Order seemed to take the 'secret message' very seriously. Sirius was called into a meeting every other day where they talked about what Voldemort was planning and, more importantly, how he had circumvented the Fidelius Charm. Remus was also contacted more frequently, but for the most part left out of the meetings because the date of the attack was so close to the next full moon and he would be on his 'mission'.

The overall information situation was difficult. James apologised a thousand times over the phone, but didn't say a word about what exactly was going on now and where they were going to escape to. Dumbledore held his hand over everything, presumably wanting to make sure they didn't make any mistake this time.

In that respect, Remus trusted Dumbledore. He didn't get along with him interpersonally, but at least the old man knew what he was doing. Remus could actually be sure that he would get James and Lily to a safe place on the 30th. But the uncertainty still gnawed at him.

Somewhere between the blink of an eye and thousand eternities, the last day before his departure dawned. And even though the situation seemed under control, it felt stranger than ever.

He could also tell Sirius knew that it was their last day and that this time it was somehow different. He had been distracted for days, a little more so after each Order meeting. This day, however, it was the most noticeable.

"What's on your mind?" he asked at one point, sitting on the couch reading, Sirius beside him, his head resting on his shoulder.

"Not much," Sirius muttered. "At least, not much I could put into words."

"Sounds mysterious," Remus said with a fake smile. He put his book aside and intertwined his hand with Sirius's. His fingers were cold.

"I'm scared of the 30th", he heard him whisper.

Remus glanced at the living room wall from where his mother was beaming at him. "Me too."

Sirius wasn't allowed to talk about anything the Order planned, and this time he actually seemed to comply. Not very reassuring for Remus, but he rather endured that, than being directly suspected of betrayal.

"It would be so much easier if you were here." He sounded soft, vulnerable.

"I know", Remus replied, even softer, even more vulnerable. He leaned his head against Sirius's. "I don't want it anymore either."

"If anything happens that day... I don't know how I'll get through it..."

"Hey," Remus straightened his head again and put a hand to Sirius's face, kissing him gently on his hair. "Nothing's going to happen. We're one step ahead of Voldemort. Dumbledore will sort it out." He stroked

his cheek with his thumb. "And I'll be back two days after that."

Sirius said nothing, just leaned into the touch.

"We've been through so much already, we'll take it in our stride, won't we?"

"I hope so."

Remus didn't like the way that sounded. Like Sirius knew something Remus didn't, something that frightened him, made him tense like that, hopeless.

Sirius lifted his head, finally looking at Remus, insistently.

"I love you, Remus."

I love you too, Sirius, so much.

I love you.

I love you.

But he couldn't get it past his lips, he just couldn't. He didn't deserve to say it, to end his eternal inner battle with it and finally give himself up. Not after everything he had already done. Not after everything he had put Sirius through.

Whenever Sirius said those words, they sounded like a question, like a plea, an open wound that wanted stitching. And Remus, even though he knew this, still couldn't answer with what he really wanted to say, really felt. Instead, he buried it, looked past the disappointment in Sirius's gaze and sealed their lips instead. It was a cruel game, Remus knew. But he hoped that this way he could at least *show* Sirius how he felt about him. His love for him was too great for those three words anyway.

When their lips met, it reminded Remus of their first time, over a year ago. Sirius had tearfully begged him to stay, not to go on the first mission. There had been something bittersweet about it, a first sense of parting, a glimmer of what was to come. The way Sirius clung to him now felt much the same. There were no tears this time, no wet cheeks, no trembling. But the feeling of hopelessness, heaviness, despair was still overwhelming. It scared Remus.

It pulled them into the bedroom, eventually. Remus tried not to feel

any of the negativity, not to let it get too close to him. But the problem with Sirius was that nothing remained hidden with him. When Sirius kissed his neck, let his hands roam over his body and pressed their hips together, he laid it all bare. Remus had never stood a chance against him.

Overcome by his emotions, Remus let Sirius take control this time, leaning back as he undressed him, covering his body with kisses. It felt strange to let Sirius set the pace so completely. Just a few weeks ago, Remus wouldn't have allowed this. But things had changed. And now he relished that he didn't have to think about anything for a moment, except Sirius's mouth and his tongue and his clouded gaze.

Remus only regained consciousness as the tension slowly drained from them. He was panting loudly into the crook of Sirius's neck, which was sore and red from his caresses. He didn't want to break away from him, even when his heartbeat had returned to a normal pace.

"I'm going to hate myself for this tomorrow," Sirius murmured, and was finally the one who broke away from Remus after a brief kiss. He laid down on his side, facing him, his eyes already half-closed.

Remus regarded Sirius tenderly, who eventually seemed to sense his gaze and opened his eyes again.

"Are you okay?" he asked Sirius cautiously, reaching for his hand. "It wasn't... too much or anything?"

"No." Sirius smiled tiredly. "No, it was just right."

"Then I'm glad." He lay down right beside him, so that they were at eye level. He felt an inner, deep contentment inside him. It chased away all the negativity, just as he had hoped. Hopefully until the end of the night.

Sirius's eyes fell shut again and his face relaxed increasingly. Remus looked at it, the familiar, flawless features, the beads of sweat running down it.

He didn't want to leave tomorrow. He never wanted to leave again. He wanted to be with him forever, to love him every day and give him all that he deserved. No more missions, no more lies.

But this time he still had to. He had to make sure Voldemort didn't kill

anyone. He had to do it for James and Lily.

But after that, it was over. He swore that to himself in that very moment.

This mission would be his last.

***

They dragged out the goodbye into the afternoon the next day. Only when Remus could already feel the first glimmers of the transformation under his skin did they get it over with.

"Please don't worry," he whispered into Sirius's hair, actually just reassuring himself. "I'll be back soon."

"I'll try," Sirius mumbled, running his hands gently over Remus's back. It felt good.

"And please take care of yourself," Remus said, releasing the hug, clasping his face with both hands and kissing him tenderly. Sirius returned the kiss and held onto one of Remus's hands.

"You too. Don't do anything stupid," came from Sirius after they had separated again. Remus smiled softly and regarded him for a moment, stroking his cheeks with both thumbs.

"Would never think of it," was all he said gently, and he would give anything in the world not to have to leave now.

He felt Sirius's hand wander up his arm. "You need to go. Your skin's getting way too hot already."

"I know." The heat was already wafting uncomfortably close to the surface, threatening to ruin the moment.

"I'll see you in four days?" asked Sirius, forcing himself to smile optimistically.

"That's right," Remus said, then broke away from Sirius with a heavy heart.

"See you then," he said.

I love you, he wanted to say. Maybe when he returned.

Maybe then he'd be strong enough.

***

"You're late," Narcissa once again redundantly stated when he finally stood in front of the door, heavily out of breath and with a heated temper.

"You don't say," he grumbled and started to head straight down the stairs.

"Try to keep yourself in check a bit this night. Tomorrow night is the final meeting. You should be fit then."

He would have liked to wring her neck for that statement alone. He could have saved himself a lot of scars if it was that easy.

"Yeah yeah," was the only thing he could say without getting rude.

"Have fun then," she just threw after him and then he was thankfully out of earshot.

He crawled into the rundown, far too familiar cellar dungeon and locked himself in. He hated it in here, hated absolutely everything about it.

The only thing that let him get through the transformation this time was the certainty that it might be the last time in this place. The last time all by himself. The last time without Sirius.

***

Amour amour

Everyone wants to tame you

Amour amour

In the end

Caught between your teeth

It was a nice house. Two storeys, a small, well-kept front garden, quiet neighbourhood. The ideal place for a young family. The ideal place for an unnoticed murder.

Voldemort had only his inner circle with him. Remus was among them, along with Bellatrix, Rodolphus, Malfoy and Dolohov. They all wore their pitch-black cloaks, their masks, and watched the house from a distance. It had become dark, about an hour ago. However, there was no light on inside the house.

"Maybe you just can't see it from the outside," Malfoy speculated in response to the silent question that had been in the air for several minutes.

"Possibly," Voldemort said neutrally.

"Surely it's also in their best interests that no one knows the house is inhabited," Remus added, secretly relieved at the absence of light.

"Right."

That Voldemort was so curt showed how focused he was. He was ready for battle, focused and fucking dangerous. Remus wouldn't face him in that state for any price in the world.

"When do you intend to strike, my lord?" asked Rodolphus cautiously.

Voldemort looked towards the house with narrowed eyes, not letting on at first whether he had heard the words. But then, a moment later, he lowered his gaze and raised his wand.

"Now," he said, and Remus swallowed.

Dolohov blasted open the door. He did it loosely from the wrist, as if he were shooing away a fly. The explosion was all the more violent

and Remus took a few steps back as pieces of wood flew past him, revealing a dark hallway. Inside, nothing could be seen.

Malfoy entered the house first, closely followed by Bellatrix, who had her wand raised menacingly and as soon as she was inside, murmured "Lumos" to light up the hallway. It was empty. On the right side, a staircase led upwards; further ahead, three doors could be made out. They were all closed.

"Something's wrong," Dolohov muttered from behind, and Bellatrix agreed with him with a snort.

"We'll stay together," Voldemort said tersely. "Ground floor first, hurry up."

Malfoy at the very front nodded and began moving towards the doors. He targeted the first one on the right and kicked it open, shining his wand inside and then signalled false alarm. Finally, when Remus was second to last in line, level with the door, he spotted an empty bathroom.

Malfoy moved on, sighting the door at the end of the corridor, on which the ball of light cast an ominous glow. Remus was tense to the extreme, although so far everything suggested that Dumbledore had complied with his silent request and that the house was empty. But still... something was strange. Something wasn't...

It took about a second from opening the door to chaos.

"STUPEFY!"

A bolt of red lightning shot through the door into the hallway and caught Malfoy square in the chest, instantly making him slump. More lightning followed, but it was already bouncing off Bellatrix's shield.

"Get in there!" roared Voldemort and they followed to the letter. With a few leaps and under the protection of Bellatrix's spell, they charged over the unconscious Malfoy into the room, which had probably once been a spacious living room, but from which all furniture had been removed. In front of them stood six Order members, their faces contorted into sinister grimaces. Moody was one of them, Sturgis, Emmeline, Fabian and Gideon and ...

Sirius.

Remus felt the air pull out of his lungs. He tried to breathe in, to stay

calm, but it seemed impossible. Why the hell was he here? Had this been Dumbledore's plan? This suicide mission?

Had Sirius known about it? Had this been the reason why he had been like that?

For a moment, everything seemed to spin.

"Glad you're here," Moody growled, then raised his right hand. He waved it once behind him, seeming to sweep the back wall of the living room with it. A second later, the wall began to shift, pushing aside, finally revealing the house's expansive back garden. There, covers had been set up with torches providing sufficient light. They certainly were prepared.

Voldemort was not impressed. He raised his arms like a conductor. "You think you can trap me?" he hissed, his voice going through Remus. A seething storm began to build, right behind Voldemort. Once it had evolved, it began to move with a rumble, passing safely over Remus and the other Death Eaters, and then engulfing the members of the Order with full force. The wind was so fierce that it broke their formation and hurled Fabian and Emmeline, who were standing in the centre, through the now exposed back wall of the room and into the back garden. Fabian slammed full force into one of the coverings, fell to the ground and lay motionless.

"Fabian!" his brother called out in panic as the squalls died down, but at least he wasn't stupid enough to turn his back on them.

The Death Eaters had seized the moment, and split up. Remus was completely beside himself, but at that moment he knew what he had to do. Before anyone else could, he rushed to Sirius and prepared himself for a fight that he absolutely could not win. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bellatrix target Sturgis, Dolohov pounce on Emmeline, Rodolphus make do with Gideon and finally Voldemort raise his wand against Mad-Eye Moody. Almost instantly, voices rose, curses were shouted and the living room and back garden were bathed in bright lights. Remus blanked them out. His attention was only on Sirius Black.

Who, probably for the first time, was looking at him the way he deserved.

"You bastards, thought we would just let you kill Lily and James, did you?" Sirius hurled a curse at him. "Surely you didn't expect that?"

The next curse. Remus fought it off, firing back half-heartedly himself, thinking about what he would probably answer if his voice wouldn't reveal him immediately.

No, we didn't expect that. But do you really think you stand a chance against us?

They were all talented, no question. But those who shied away from unforgivable curses were always at a disadvantage.

The first cries confirmed his suspicions. Bellatrix was going about her favourite pastime and had used the Cruciatus curse on Sturgis, simply because she liked the sound of agony. Dolohov was probably just waiting for his opportunity to try out some other cruel curse-creation of his. And Moody was already stumbling badly against Voldemort. How the hell was Sirius going to get through this? How had they been so reckless? It was driving Remus mad.

It went on like that for several minutes, Remus playing charades against Sirius, who was fighting him full of fervour, nearly knocking his lights out several times. If he hadn't been so full of fear and tension, he would have been proud of how well Sirius was doing in dueling. Remus only owed it to his countless killing missions that he was still a little better.

He thought about what he could do to get Sirius out of here. He had to find a way. If the others died, he could handle it, but not him. No way. He'd rather die himself first.

At one point, as Gideon's cries of pain and Emmeline's choked gasps rang out over the din of battle, Remus still had no solution. He gave them a pitying sideways glance, knowing full well that they probably had only a few agonising minutes left before death.

But then suddenly, it became as bright as day.

"Interesting troop you have there," a voice roared over them, silencing all fighting in one fell swoop. The only thing left to hear was Sturgis's soft whimper.

Remus and Sirius lowered their wands at the same time, turning their heads to the great ball of fire that had appeared a few feet above the fighters. The fire seemed to spin on its axis at first, then burst open and transformed into a large, fiery red phoenix. It spread its wings and continued to rise upwards, giving sight to the source of the piercing words. Albus Dumbledore.

"Oh, what an honour," Voldemort hissed. "I suppose someone has finally found the exit from his office?"

"Your visit here was a mistake," Dumbledore said coldly, slowly sinking down to the floor. None of the Death Eaters intended to attack him.

"Ambushing me here was a mistake," Voldemort replied. "But so be it. I'll be happy to add another name to the death list."

"We'll see," Dumbledore said, firing the first curse right past Moody at Voldemort. He bounced it off an invisible shield, laughed maniacally, eyes wide, and in the next moment swooped towards Dumbledore like an eagle in a dive. And suddenly there was terrible chaos.

The speed at which Dumbledore and Voldemort fought was inhuman. Even if it had been confusing before, now one could hardly attribute any of the lightning bolts that shot through the air to anyone.

"Here is where the music plays," Sirius hissed over the noise, disarming him by a hair. Remus backed away a few steps and turned his attention back to his own opponent. Dumbledore's presence changed things. Were they perhaps not lost after all?

The thought became increasingly entangled in Remus's mind and made him think. Would they even be able to overpower him and the other Death Eaters? Would they have a realistic chance of killing Voldemort?

Regulus flashed before his inner eye and with him his insistent voice.

You sit at the source, Remus. Voldemort trusts you blindly. Only you can find out where the rest of the Horcruxes are.

What would happen if they killed Voldemort? He would live on, somehow, after all he had several Horcruxes lying around. Would it even be possible to trace him and the remaining parts of his soul then? Or would it possibly just make things worse?

Discomfort rose in Remus, almost something like fear. He didn't know how much of it came from this legitimate thought and how much from the broken part of him that still worshipped Voldemort like a god. But no matter how he twisted it, he kept coming to the same conclusion:

He couldn't let Voldemort die. Not today.

Sirius barely gave him time to breathe, but out of the corner of his eye he saw Dumbledore and Voldemort maltreating each other, each spell more fierce than the last. To an outsider, it was impossible to tell which of them was dominant. Perhaps he had also overreacted....

Rodolphus cried out, snapping Remus out of his thoughts. He couldn't help it, he turned his head and saw Gideon standing triumphantly over the Death Eater, who was writhing on the ground.

"There you go!" roared Gideon with fervour and immediately ran to his brother, who still seemed to be unconscious. The idiot, he should rather...

A whip, a sharp hiss and Remus's wand flew out of his hand. And as if that wasn't bad enough, it didn't just land on the ground a few feet away, but took a high arc and landed right in Sirius's hand.

Remus stared at him with wide eyes.

"Well, that's what happens when you're inattentive," he said smugly and was about to put the wand in his pocket. But then he paused, looking at it. And turned white as a sheet in one fell swoop.

"Where did you get that wand?" he asked harshly, staring at Remus like a ghost. Remus cursed himself for not getting another wand for this mission.

He didn't answer again, hating what that did to Sirius's face. It still didn't occur to that gullible idiot to suspect him, he thought for sure that something really bad had happened to Remus. It was almost unbearable.

Sirius began to sway and Remus wanted most to run and save him from falling.

"Where is he?" he asked and Remus could see the numbness slowly turning to anger. "What have you done to him?"

Remus raised his hands defensively and took a few steps back. Hopefully, hopefully none of the other Death Eaters would see what was happening here and get the idea to save him.

"Answer me or I'll kill you, I swear," Sirius hissed, almost unrecognisable. He had a firm grip on Remus's wand and his own pointed menacingly at him. Remus thought feverishly. At the same moment, a colossal bolt of lightning struck Voldemort only a few feet

from him, catapulting him through the air and slamming him violently into the living room wall. So violently that he punched a hole in the wall, and so violently that he let out a cry of pain. Voldemort. Screamed in pain. Remus's head jerked back and forth between Sirius and the spectacle.

Dumbledore had no mercy, he flung spell after spell at Voldemort, who knew how to ward them all off, but was bleeding and seemed increasingly unhinged. Things were not looking good. Remus looked around for help, but the other Death Eaters were busy too, Gideon fighting Bellatrix with Sturgis and Moody having freed Emmeline from Dolohov's choking attack and using the covers to work him from two sides. Dumbledore had turned the tide. And Remus was on his own.

It was always said that time slowed down at crucial moments. Bullshit. It was all happening so fast that Remus didn't have a second to think.

It started with a simple disarming spell. Voldemort managed to deflect it, but the wand slipped out of his hand slightly. Dumbledore sensed the opportunity and Remus the danger. While he was still waving his wand, Remus dashed forward, ignoring Sirius's "Stay here!" and was extremely lucky that his spells missed him. His muscles howled at the sudden strain, but he didn't care. He saw only Voldemort before him, about to lose and ruin everything Regulus had built. He couldn't die, not here, not now.

He reached Voldemort, who hadn't seen him coming himself. Pushed him aside and his long cloak dragged along the wall of the house. Dumbledore fired, a vicious lash of a whip. And it hit Remus square in the face.

The pain made everything go white for a moment.

The world around him went silent, the chaos, the voices, everything ebbed away. He was only peripherally aware that he was sinking to the ground, completely fixated on his head that felt as if his skull had been split.

But he was alive, he was alive. And so was Voldemort.

Maybe this was that slow moment everyone always talked about. That brief peace before it all ended. He couldn't tell how long it lasted, but at some point, as the pain subsided and he regained his breath, his

hearing and sight returned as well. And with them, doom.

It looked bizarre. There was himself, slumped like a doll, the centre of attention. All the other fighting was over. Dolohov was holding his arm, Bellatrix had lost her wand, but no further attention was paid to them. All eyes were solely on Remus. He couldn't remember ever being stared at by so many people at once.

It took him far too long to understand. To get the feeling in his fingers, to run them over his bloodied face. There was something missing.

There was no mask.

Only then did he become aware of the acrid silence. He had attributed it to the pain, but it persisted, eerie, devastating.

So, that was it.

And worst of all, he knew exactly what to do now. It was as if his subconscious had already worked ahead for this moment, already rehearsed what he had to do to keep up appearances, to save his life. To save everyone else without them knowing it.

He looked every single one of them in the face, all except Sirius, because that he couldn't. He felt tears welling in his eyes, but he ignored them and put on his most disgusting, arrogant grin.

"Oops," he said, rubbing blood and traitorous tears from his face with his sleeve.

"What's going on?" asked Moody, of all people, who seemed to be the first to find his voice again. "Lupin, what is the meaning of this?"

Remus straightened, ignoring the throbbing pain in his skull. "What does it look like?"

"What a shame," said Voldemort, who had also straightened up and now put his arm protectively around Remus's shoulder. "So much work for nothing."

Remus looked to Dumbledore. He was visibly shocked and let his eyes wander over Remus, from top to bottom, until finally he lowered his gaze in surrender, in disappointment.

"I see," was all he said. And that was it. The words burned into

Remus's guts like fire.

"I don't" said Sturgis, gesticulating wildly. "What's going on here? Has he hexed Remus? What's he doing..."

Voldemort didn't let him finish. Smiling slyly, he waved his wand, creating wisps of smoke that began to dance around him and Remus, sending out individual columns that travelled to the knocked out Death Eaters.

"Sometimes the truth hurts, useless half-blood," Voldemort crooned as the wisps of smoke quickly grew thicker. "But it's easier if you admit your blindness right away. Realise your momentous errors of judgement."

Dumbledore seemed to realize what the smoke was and what it meant. But he was too late. By the time he had the right spell ready, the Death Eaters had almost completely melted into the black clouds.

Remus didn't care. He didn't care if Dumbledore split his skull again, if he sent lightning or flames at him, if he tore him apart. As the smoke surrounded him, coalescing with him and slowly making him disappear, he looked at Sirius. For the last time, probably. It hurt, Remus couldn't put into words how much.

Sirius was silent. Why wasn't he saying anything? Why wasn't he shouting at him? Demanding an explanation? Why were there no tears? Why was there... nothing?

His face was blank. His eyes were fixed on him, but he seemed to see nothing through them. He seemed as if he wasn't there at all.

Remus had always suspected it. Right from the first time he had seem him in the hospital. Had known how much he meant to Sirius, how much destructive potential this love had. To see the consummation of it so clearly before him now was more than Remus could bear.

I'm so sorry.

I'm not the monster you are seeing right now.

I was trying to do something right.

I tried to be better.

I tried.

I love you. Please believe me.

Please don't believe yourself.

Then the smoke broke their eye contact and everything around Remus went black. The last thing he felt was Voldemort's hand on his shoulder, proud, repulsive, icy cold.

It took all Remus's strength not to push it away.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Amour' by Rammstein

The next chapters are going to hurt. I’m sorry.

Chapter 42: Dreams End

Sirius had always known that he loved more than he was loved. Even though he had always loathed his mother, he believed her saying that deep down he was unlovable. It was a fact, an unassailable certainty that Sirius had accepted, no matter how ugly and painful it had been at times.

He had always given his love away generously regardless, had always had far too much of it. And even though it was worthless and mostly unwanted, at some point in his life he had found people who had actually accepted it. James had been the first. Then Peter, then...

Remus had almost had him. He had almost falsely convinced him that someone loved him too, despite everything. His betrayal and the madness that would come from it were only punishment for that recklessness. After all, Sirius did not deserve it any other way.

He did not deserve it any other way.

Chapter 43: Lost

Chapter Notes

CW Emotional Distress, Hurt, Grief, the whole palette

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maybe we will meet again, but there

Where you left me

You will not find me again

With every minute that passed, James regretted his decision not to go with them more. Of course, it had been the more sensible thing to do to stay with Lily and remain in their safe house with the other Order members, but it still felt wrong. Especially because Sirius had volunteered so willingly earlier, even after their argument, even if it meant risking his life. It drove James mad that he still hadn't spoken to him and hadn't been able to tell him how much the gesture meant to him.

They waited for hours. Miserable, unbearably slow passing hours in which the amount of conversation that came up could be counted on one hand. He tried to distract Lily a little, but that wouldn't work either. Again and again she got up with difficulty, walked a few steps back and forth to keep her circulation going and then stepped to the open front door to get some fresh air. In its own unique way, it was Lily's little routine that finally managed to calm James down a tiny bit.

That was, until at some point she drew in a sharp breath and turned to him, eyes wide. "They're back!"

Tension shot through the room like a bullet. Those who had been sitting, James included, were drawn out of their chairs and towards the door. James was the first to get there, took one anxious look outside and his heart skipped a beat. There was someone missing, wasn't there? Panicking, he let his gaze wander over the arrivals, who all looked pale and serious. Sirius was there, thank God, but....

"Where are the Prewetts, Alastor?" asked Doge between James's and Lily's shoulders before James could. Anxiously, James looked to Moody, who scowled more than ever, but only waved it off.

"They're alive, don't worry. Fabian got hit in the head though, so he and Gideon went to St. Mungo's. But everything will be all right."

Relief settled like a balm on James's raw nerves, but at the same time came the question marks.

"Then what happened?" asked Lily, equally unable to make sense of the funeral atmosphere.

Moody shook his head mechanically and pointed his finger into the hut. "We'll discuss this inside."

James could see how much Moody tightened his jaw at that, and how he clenched his fists slightly. He was raging inside.

James, Lily and the rest of the Order retreated from the door and made way for the arrivals. After Moody, Emmeline limped past them, a fleeting smile on her face. Then Sturgis, looking as confused as James felt, and finally Sirius, the last. Lily touched him lightly on the shoulder as he passed and whispered. "I'm glad you're all right," but he didn't seem to notice. He continued to stare at the back of Sturgis's head as if he otherwise wouldn't know where to go. When he was past them, Lily gave James a worried look. He bit his lip.

"Dumbledore sends his apologies," Moody said as they all lined up in a circle. "But he has a lot to sort out now." He glanced at the fireplace, which had dwindled to embers, and it abruptly rekindled itself, bathing everyone present in flickering orange light.

"What happened?" asked Diggel worriedly, by now it seemed clear to everyone present that something had gone fundamentally wrong.

Moody took one deep breath and looked at his companions, all of whom had their eyes fixed on the ground. "I don't think there's a gentle way to say this," he began, and it didn't help with James's worry.

"Voldemort came to the flat with five of his Death Eaters in tow. It turns out that one of them was Remus Lupin."

The flickering of the fireplace suddenly seemed unbearably loud. It filled the emptiness that spread in James's head all at once,

resounding there deafeningly. James wanted to cover his ears.

"Excuse me?" someone muttered, James couldn't place it. Moody explained again, patiently. Even added this time that it wasn't an Imperius Curse, and almost certainly not a Polyjuice Potion. That plain and simple Remus Lupin, James's best friend for nearly ten years, had betrayed them all and had tried to kill him, his wife and unborn child.

"That's impossible." Mary's voice, he recognised it anywhere. She sounded rock-solidly convinced, and pissed off. "Do you hear how crazy that sounds? This has to be a mistake."

"It was him."

Jamess' gaze shot to Sirius, who had spoken for the first time, so quietly it was barely understood. He was staring holes in the ground, his eyes dark.

"We've all seen him," Emmeline added, taking some of the stares away from Sirius. "There's no doubt about it."

No doubt.

No doubt.

No doubt.

Everything began to spin in his head. It began with the same, angry denial Mary had uttered, but was quickly replaced, by terrifying, numbing realisation.

Remus had revealed their hiding place to Voldemort.

James had appointed Remus the Secret Keeper and Remus had turned them in.

Suddenly it all made sense.

His long absences, his reluctance to go on Order missions, his curiosity.

No doubt.

Lily slumped in front of him, one hand pressed over her mouth, shoulders quivering. Peter rushed to her, tears in his eyes himself, and put an arm around her shoulders comfortingly. James was grateful for

this, for he himself seemed unable to move even an inch, no longer any feeling left in his limbs.

Everything inside him was numb too.

"I can't believe it," Peter murmured incredulously as he stroked Lily's back. "Not Remus."

Not Remus, repeated the echo inside him.

Not Remus, who had started shaking in his first year at school when a professor had called on him. Who had loved books more than people, whose reserved smile had always been hard earned but all the more rewarding. Who was attentive, listened, always knew what was wanted, always said the right thing. The Remus who had drunkenly drilled into them how much they meant to him every single time.

Not this Remus.

Not him.

"I know this is a lot to digest right now," Moody eventually said, pressed. "For me, among the most. But we need to start working through it as soon as possible now. Lupin was the spy we have suspected in our ranks for so long. We must now trace which attacks and murders we can directly attribute to him. Then we will also know where our weak points were and how we can protect ourselves from further spies."

Suddenly James heard angry footsteps over the murmurs and flickering flames. James turned his head to see Sirius angrily shoving his way between two shoulders and stomping towards the exit.

"Sirius, wait!" shouted Emmeline, taking a step forward, but Moody raised an arm in front of her.

"Leave him," he grumbled. "I'll speak to him privately once he's calmed down."

James watched in shock as Sirius tore open the front door, not stopped by anyone or called back. Did they really think it was a good idea to leave him alone now, at this moment?

James yelled at his lame legs, forcing them to start moving. When they finally followed him, he charged after Sirius, through the door, slamming it behind him. Sirius was already almost out of the protective shield.

"Wait!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Sirius, please!"

He stopped, thank God. But he didn't turn, didn't say anything either.

James closed in on him, but didn't dare touch him.

"Where are you going?" he asked, out of breath.

"I have preparations to make."

"For what?"

"I'm going to track him down."

James frowned. "Remus? Are you going to confront him?"

"No." Sirius turned to him at last. He looked him firmly in the eye, for the first time that evening. It sent a shiver down James's spine.

"I'm going to kill him."

Almost reflexively, James's hand shot forward and firmly grasped Sirius's arm. "What?" he said breathlessly. "Are you serious?"

Sirius shook James's hand off roughly. As he did so, James felt how much he was quivering, how tense to the breaking point. "I've never been so serious about anything in my life."

"This is insanity, Sirius," James spoke up. "Look, I know how you feel right now, I feel the same..."

"You don't," Sirius interrupted him gruffly, his voice razor sharp. "You don't."

"What do you mean? Remus was my best friend too... We all fell for him equally..."

"No." Sirius shook his head, pressing his lips together, presumably so James wouldn't see how much they were trembling.

"Sirius..." began James again, but it was a mistake.

"Don't you get it?" burst out of Sirius, his cold reserve giving way to naked desperation. "It's all my fault!" He pointed at the hut erratically. "Everything they're talking about in there now, all the murders, all the suffering, it was all my fault! Because I told him everything, because I didn't realise!"

"We all didn't realise...", James tried again weakly, but it only made the situation worse.

"But I was living with him, James!" cried Sirius, pressing his trembling fingers to his chest. "I *was* with him! I've had..." His voice failed and for a moment it looked like he was going to vomit. James felt a sharp twinge in his chest.

"I should have realised!" continued Sirius when he had regained his composure. James saw tears gathering in his eyes and tried to blink them away hastily. "But instead, I've let him take advantage of me and fake an ideal world while he's been plotting your and Lily's deaths!"

When the tears did come, there seemed to be no stopping them. They ran down his face and dripped onto the parched floor. As if caught by an unstoppable wave, he lost his posture, bent forward and pressed his face into his trembling hands. At the same moment his legs gave way and he sank to the ground.

"James," he sobbed, and it sounded so broken that James's heart shattered into a thousand pieces. "He killed Marlene!"

James's vision blurred as he dropped to his knees and hugged Sirius tightly. "It's not your fault," he whispered, but it fell on deaf ears. Sirius clung to him and James felt every sob, every stifled breath, abundantly clear. It wasn't long before he joined the rhythm.

He had never seen Sirius like this before. So completely unhinged, crying so hard he almost screamed, not knowing how to express his sorrow. It was unbearable. And James didn't know how to ease it, was so devastated himself that he couldn't do more than run his hand soothingly over Sirius's back and whisper over and over, "It's not your fault."

It didn't help. Sirius kept crying, crumbling to dust in James's arms, dissolving until there was nothing left. And then, eventually, the tears dried up. And James felt the hardness suddenly return to him.

He jerked away from James and struggled to get up again. His face was red, his eyes puffy, but there were no more tears. James adjusted

his glasses and looked at him questioningly.

"I'm going to find him," Sirius whispered, his mask back in place. "And I'm going to kill him."

"No, Sirius, alone won't do any good." James straightened up, roughly wiped the tears from his cheek and looked urgently at his best friend. "That's suicide."

"Then help me with it."

James took a step back. "Even two of us can't do that. You know you're messing with Voldemort himself here. We have to plan this with the Order. Otherwise we're going to die."

"So what if we do," was all Sirius said.

"You say that so easily," James said angrily. "But I have a family. I can't just leave them behind for some suicide mission."

Hatred shot towards him, hitting him so sharply and unexpectedly that he took another step back.

"Oh that's right, you're right. Then leave it to the one who has no one left to miss him anyway."

"I didn't mean it like that," James said no less angrily. "Besides, you mean the world to me! I couldn't bear to lose you."

"Then help me."

James couldn't meet his razor-sharp gaze. Desperately, he shook his head. "I can't."

A bitter smile curled Sirius's lips. It almost drove James mad.

"I see."

"But that doesn't have to mean the Order can't help," James said frantically. "Come inside and we'll talk about it. Please don't do anything rash. You might regret it."

Sirius shook his head. "There's nothing left I don't regret anyway."

Then he stepped out of the shield and disappeared.

And James feared he had lost more than just one friend that night.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Love Poems', a collection of poems by Bertolt Brecht. (not 100% happy with the translation, feel like it slaps harder in the German version. I hope the meaning is conveyed nonetheless.)

Hope you liked it!

See ya <3

Chapter 44: Hallucinogenics

Chapter Notes

Here are two chapters :* (or one and a half rather)
I have good and bad news! The good news is, I've finished chapter 66, which means I only have to write the epilogue now. So the story is basically finished. <3
Bad news: Unfortunately I still have to slow down the next uploads for a bit! Chapters are still coming of course, but for now only 1-2 times a week max!

Have fun!:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Cause I carried on like the wayward son

And now through and through, I've come undone

And now I am just but the wayward man

What with my bloodshot eyes and my shaky hands

Regulus almost put a death curse on Remus when he stormed into the hut in the middle of the night. Just caught in an uncomfortable doze on the couch, he was wide awake within a millisecond, shot upwards and had grabbed his wand from the coffee table, ready to give it his all. He only stopped his drowsy frenzy when he saw Remus's face.

"Shit, is that blood?" he asked irritably, lowering his wand as he stepped cautiously towards him. Remus idly felt the dried blood on his forehead and in his hair before dropping his hand again and looking at Regulus as if he had to tell him right now that he was terminally ill.

"Reg, it's gone wrong," Remus said, sounding utterly crushed.

It sparked panic in Regulus. "What do you mean? Did someone die?"

Remus shook his head vehemently, which made Regulus breathe a sigh of relief.

"Then what do you mean? Did Voldemort blame you for them not being there?"

"No. The Order was there, trying to ambush Voldemort. There was a fight. And I got busted."

Remus said the last sentence so quickly that it took a second to really sink in.

"What, the Order knows?"

Remus nodded and before Regulus could do anything, he found himself already in a crushing, and even more surprising, embrace. Regulus froze. He felt the fleeting urge to push Remus away, but then he felt his shirt getting wet and controlled himself.

"It was a disaster," Remus whispered chokingly, clinging even tighter to Regulus. "You should have seen Sirius's face."

Regulus let out a resigned breath and patted Remus's back gently. "I can imagine."

Silence reigned for a while and Regulus did his best to reassure Remus, even though he was probably the most unsuitable person in the world to do so. After all, he had proved that grandly the last time with Barty.

Finally Remus released the hug and took a deep breath. Regulus looked at him sympathetically. "Sit down. Has anyone looked at your head yet?"

Remus shook his head languidly. "After Voldemort dismissed me, I went straight to you. I needed to talk to someone about it."

"That sort of thing is not to be taken lightly," Regulus said sternly, leading him to the couch. He set out a glass of water for him, which Remus drained in one go, and searched the supply cupboard for cleaning materials. When he found the appropriate ones, he returned to Remus and began to examine his head.

"It actually doesn't look too bad at first glance. All that blood suggested otherwise at first."

"Hasn't bled in a while either," Remus muttered, shoulders drooping. "I think so, at least. Haven't really been paying attention."

"Tell me exactly what happened. Maybe it'll help sort out your thoughts a bit."

And Remus told him. As Regulus moistened his cloths, freeing him from the dried blood, he recounted every detail of his night in Godric's Hollow.

"It was actually good of you to do that," Regulus finally said when he had finished. And he meant it. "We still need Voldemort. If only to be able to kill him at the right moment. When he has no more Horcruxes and is truly vulnerable."

"I know." Remus sounded devastated. "But it wasn't supposed to end like this. Sirius wasn't supposed to find out this way. Now they'll think I tried to kill James and Lily."

"They will," Regulus said. "And they'll associate a whole lot more things with you retrospectively. And that will only increase their anger."

"Understandably so. Most of the things they'll accuse me of, I actually did. They have every right to hate me."

"You still don't deserve it. You're not the same anymore. You've changed."

"Have I, though?" Remus lowered his head, his fingers digging into the fabric of his jeans.

Regulus paused. "A few months ago you would have split my skull if I'd told you about my plan. And now you've already helped destroy one of his Horcruxes. So, to answer your question, yes you have."

Remus was silent for a long time after that. It wasn't until Regulus was finished with his head that he finally whispered:

"I really want to talk to Sirius. Try to explain it to him, somehow."

Regulus shook his head. "You shouldn't face Sirius right now. The consequences would probably be terrible. What we need is distance, and time."

Regulus paused, weighing if he really should say the next words. Eventually he gave in to himself. "But there's something else you can do."

Remus already seemed to understand what Regulus was getting at, but he continued nonetheless.

"Help me kill Voldemort. Sirius won't believe you, no matter how many times you try to convince him of your true intentions. So show him with your actions. While it won't undo your previous actions ..."

"It would at least give me a chance," continued Remus, and Regulus nodded encouragingly.

"Yes. It would."

That he was 100% sure Sirius would never forgive him, he kept to himself.

"You're right, Reg. It's the only choice I have." Remus clenched his fists. "I feel like, after tonight, Voldemort's influence on me has vanished anyway."

"Good." Regulus rose, held out his hand to Remus in a prompting manner and said, in a firm voice:

"Then stop feeling sorry for yourself. We have work to do."

And Remus grasped his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Hallucinogenics' by Matt Maeson ft. Lana Del Rey

Chapter 45: When You Cry

Chapter Notes

CW Depression, Grief, Abstract Suicidal Ideation, Alcohol Abuse, Hurt/No Comfort, Mentions of Torture, Emotional Torture

Please mind the CWs! :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The alcohol is good, as good as never before

The nights are long, as long as never before

Fought to the end, but you defeated me

Is it my fault, or do I deserve it?

The human body could get used to almost anything. Three hours of sleep a night, hardly any food, cigarettes, alcohol, no sunlight, no social contacts. Even the combination of these worked.

Of course, that came at a price. Of course, at some point the body constantly demanded sleep, food, fresh air. Punished you with dizziness and concentration problems, cramps and pain. But in the end, it wasn't so bad. It almost didn't matter.

What mattered was the mission.

It was all Sirius had left.

***

The flat would be almost unrecognisable to an outsider. Sirius had turned it completely upside down. Had collected every little thing,

every little clue, and laid it all out on the living room floor. Crumpled notes, a worn diary, a strange box full of potions. Next to it he had placed the latest edition of the Daily Prophet, the Order's current shift schedule and the list of worthwhile Death Eater targets.

It wasn't easy to find a start. But Sirius threw himself into the research with a zeal that only hatred and a thirst for revenge could produce. Sirius knew he wouldn't be easy to find, that Voldemort would protect him and possibly hide him, but he didn't care. He would find him. Even if it was the last thing he did.

Night became his new day. There he would go in search of Death Eaters, try to get his hands on one of them to interrogate them, to tease anything out of them. It was a Sisyphean task as it turned out. They were more cautious than ever.

But he had the time. Moody had given him time off from the Order. Had been at his door two days after the fight, unusually quiet. Had tried to talk to Sirius, but he hadn't responded to any of his questions. Finally, he'd offered to take a break for a while to 'clear his head again' and Sirius had almost laughed at him. Clarity was his enemy. Clarity was his downfall. He would do everything in his power to never get his head straight again.

He had not been in contact with anyone since. There were a few unopened letters on the table and the phone rang now and then, but Sirius ignored it all. Hearing those pitiful voices again, or even having to look into those regretful faces, he couldn't bear.

There was only one person he wanted to see, oddly enough. The one person he knew would not pity him. The next night, she was his target.

***

"Have you looked at the time?" asked Dorcas Meadowes sharply as she opened the flat door. She leaned in the doorway and eyed him up and down. "Christ, you look disastrous."

"Can I come in?" asked Sirius harshly, clearing his throat. He hadn't used his voice in days.

Wordlessly, she pushed the door open wider and let him enter. He followed her down the dimly lit hallway, into a small sitting room, with two walls of overflowing bookshelves and a comfortable-looking couch in the middle. Dorcas motioned for him to take a seat on the latter.

Sirius took a deep breath. The booze he'd squeezed in just before the visit was clouding his senses, but it was a pleasant background noise by now. Made the words come easier most of the time, especially the unpleasant ones.

"I'm sorry," he began, trying to speak as clearly as possible.

Dorcas folded her arms.

"Sorry for what?"

"Everything," Sirius said quietly, his gaze lowered. "That has to do with... him."

"With Remus?"

Sirius winced as if he had been slapped in the face.

"...Yes," he replied quietly nonetheless.

He felt Dorcas's piercing gaze on him, the hardness, the dislike in it.

"Listen, I really..."

"Save it," she interrupted him. "I know exactly what you're going to say. You didn't know about *anything*, you're *sorry*, but you just didn't *realise* that you'd been living under the same roof as Marlene's killer for over a year. However that works."

"I can't explain it either," was all Sirius said, feeling all too familiar self-loathing flare up inside him.

"Good, we've got that bit out of the way now. Why are you here, anyway?"

Sirius lifted his gaze, meeting Dorcas's mirthless eyes, seeing so much familiarity in them, so much of himself.

"I want to find him," he said. "And then kill him."

It elicited a mocking laugh from Dorcas.

"Good, that makes two of us."

Sirius had secretly hoped for this, but hearing it so crystal clear caused something akin to excitement to rise within him. Interested, he leaned forward.

"Would you help me find him?"

Dorcas crossed her legs and took a moment with her answer.

"It won't be easy, even with two of us. We have to be strategic about it. Have you thought of a sensible plan yet?"

Sirius told her succinctly what he had in mind. In the end, she nodded.

"Probably the best option is to try to get to him via some small flicker of information. With the right incentive, they always love to sing too."

The corner of her mouth twitched again as she said this. Sirius didn't mind the implication, quite the opposite. If that was what it took to get information, Sirius would gladly torture those disgusting Death Eaters. They had it coming anyway.

"So I'm going to ask around, too, in the Order. Find us some good hotspots. Be ready until then. And then we'll have a a really good time together, how does that sound?"

Sirius smiled, it felt foreign.

"That sounds good."

***

The bench was very uncomfortable. One of the kind that even homeless people avoided for fear of dislocating their back in the night. The wood splintered at the ends, the struts hung askew and bored sharply into the back when leaning back, and some of the nails were still half sticking out. An instrument of torture.

Unfortunately, it was still their bench. Dorcas had chosen it. And now they'd both been sitting on it, for close to an hour, waiting. And waiting.

Sirius stretched his aching legs and tried to ignore the piercing feeling of hunger in his stomach. The Polyjuice Potion hadn't helped against that, quite the opposite. Thanks to it, he now had heartburn as well.

"We could have put ourselves under some fucking invisibility cloak," Sirius grumbled quietly into his full blond beard. "Then we could have saved ourselves the charade here, too."

"With you? Not a chance. I don't want alcohol poisoning," said Dorcas, smiling as if Sirius had just complimented her.

"Funny," was all Sirius replied, rubbing his stiff neck.

"Don't be like that," she hissed softly and then leaned her head against his shoulder. Annoyed, he put an arm around her shoulder. Was there anyone who would even buy their show?

"It can't be that long now," he whispered, casting a fleeting glance at the cloudy night sky. Tomorrow was a full moon.

"Let's wait and see."

She said nothing more after that. And they waited.

Sirius didn't want to remain in that position for too long, though. Over the past few weeks, he had occasionally thought he craved human closeness, but as he discovered, that was not the case. He could hardly stand it. Therefore, at some point, when the touch began to burn too much on his skin, he took his arm from her shoulders and interlaced his fingers on his lap. Dorcas seemed to understand, thankfully, and took her head off his shoulder. She still looked at him thoughtfully from the side, Sirius sensed.

"Have you actually tried talking to anyone about it?" she asked quietly.

Sirius's fingernails dug into the back of his hand.

Did the pathetic breakdown in front of James count?

"No," he finally decided. "Don't intend to either."

"I don't mean to be insulting, but when you're not on Polyjuice Potion, you look like a dead man walking. You're going to get yourself killed if you keep this up."

Sirius would rather fight ten dragons at once than have this

conversation.

"I know what I'm doing."

"That's the big problem, Sirius." Dorcas's voice was quiet, lacking some of her usual bite. "I know what I'm talking about."

"So, you're still chipper too, what's the problem?" Sirius stared straight ahead, his fingers so tense it hurt.

"Sometimes, appearances are deceiving."

"Just let it go, okay?" hissed Sirius before she could say anything else. "Once we track him down, everything will be better."

"Whatever you say." Oh, he knew what Dorcas was actually going to say. She threw it at him, this bitter: *it will never get better. Nothing you do will undo the past*. It was the familiar tenor. Sirius was glad she didn't say it out loud.

But that was also exactly why he had chosen Dorcas for his mission. She was broken enough herself not to want to save him unnecessarily. Sirius didn't want to be saved. He wanted to hate, he wanted to cause pain, he wanted to make suffer. And for once, at least, the target wasn't going to be himself.

***

He had to sit on this shitty bench for another two hours. But in fact the drudgery was worth it. At some point, in the middle of the Muggle alley, only about 15 yards from the bench, a darkly dressed figure crept out, hood up and head down. Bingo.

Dorcas reacted immediately. Light-footed, she rose and took up pursuit. They didn't have much time, if the Death Eater thought they were unobserved, they could disappear at any moment.

Sirius kept close to Dorcas, his heart pounding uncomfortably loudly in his chest. There was one, right in front of them, all alone and unprotected! He had never been this far since he began his venture.

If it had been just him, he would surely have blown it at that moment. He was so nervous that he could barely keep his wand straight. But

Dorcas was different, she knew what she was doing. And she didn't even draw her wand. She just kept trudging towards the figure that still didn't seem to have noticed her, an aura of determination about her that irritated Sirius. She moved closer, closer still, leapt forward, grabbed the figure by the arm, pulled them towards her and... punched them right in the face, with all her might.

With a shrill cry, the figure slumped and lay motionless. Dorcas shook out her hand, bent over the slumped figure.

"That's what I meant, Sirius", she said, smugly. "Most witches or wizards are absolute losers when it comes to proper fighting. So hit them, when they least expect... What the actual fuck?" Sirius saw her eyes widen.

"What is it?" asked Sirius nervously, catching up with her.

"Holy shit." She shook her head in disbelief. "Fucking look who we got."

It took Sirius a moment to make out the features in the dark. When he finally did, he felt like laughing out loud.

There in the dirt before him was none other than Bellatrix Lestrange.

***

"You're lucky you punched her in the face," Sirius gasped as he and Dorcas hoisted the unconscious woman into an old wooden chair and began to tie her up. "She would have blocked any spell you cast."

"Quite possibly."

"What was she doing there all by herself? I mean, we knew there was a secret entrance somewhere, but why would she go there alone?"

"As arrogant as that woman is, I can imagine that she thought she could handle even an Order patrol on her own."

As Bellatrix was tied to the chair, Sirius regarded her disparagingly. It was strange to stand so still in front of her, after all she had been constantly trying to kill him in their last encounters.

"Make sure you don't get too close to her," he murmured absently. "She can make anything her own if she wants to."

"Hmm." Dorcas began to circle her, looking thoughtful. "I don't really know what to do with her yet anyway. I think getting her to talk might be a real challenge."

"True." The more he thought about it, the more resigned he became. "Probably might as well not bother. You're more likely to get a rock to talk"

"I didn't get my hands dirty here for nothing. We'll just try." Dorcas spun Bellatrix along with her chair so that she was facing the bare wall. They had chosen one of the abandoned safehouses as their interrogation site, a place no one else could find unless they knew where it was. Then she put up a few more candles and put out the lights. As little orientation as possible.

"Okay." Sirius sat down on one of the other chairs, sighing heavily. Now it was back to waiting. At least this time he was sitting comfortably.

***

Bellatrix wasn't out of it for long. The first sign was a soft rustling of clothes, then a tugging at her bonds, then a small, chuckling, amused laugh.

"Very nice," she giggled. She turned her head and caught sight of Sirius and Dorcas, by now transformed back and outwardly calm.

"Oh, my dear cousin, to what do I owe the pleasure?" she purred. If she was still in pain from the punch that adorned her face as a bloodshot stain, she didn't let on.

Dorcas took the floor. "Sleep well?"

Bellatrix let her gaze wander to her. Curiosity flashed. "And who are you supposed to be, little rat?"

"We ask the questions." Dorcas remained quiet. She stepped in front of Bellatrix, leaning forward. "And if you cooperate very nicely, we

might be able to get the whole thing over painlessly."

"How exciting." You could tell she wasn't intimidated one bit. Like this was nothing more than a game to her. It was already driving Sirius crazy.

"Well, pay attention, then." Dorcas raised her wand warningly. "Where is Remus Lupin hiding?"

A laugh, loud, unpleasant. Sirius clenched his fists.

"Knew you would," she giggled. "Are you his little rescue party? How sweet. But it's a wasted effort, I can promise you that. The werewolf is even more loyal to the Dark Lord than I am."

"We're not here to rescue him," Sirius hissed, trying to mask how awful her words felt. "We're here to bring him to his deserved punishment."

That interrupted her laughter, oddly enough. Narrowing her eyes, she looked at Sirius and then snorted. "Then you're not as stupid as I thought after all."

Oh, how he hated her. How he wanted to wring her neck.

"You haven't answered my question," Dorcas drew attention back to herself.

"Nor will I," Bellatrix said lightly.

"We'll see about that."

It went on like that for quite a while. Bellatrix let the threats bounce off her, even as Dorcas began to inflict pain on her, she still looked like she was enjoying it. Sirius had guessed. Surely someone as masochistic and sadistic as her volunteered for such torture on a regular basis. It was pointless.

Dorcas, however, didn't seem to want to realise that yet. She continued, at one point even with Cruciatus, but even Bellatrix's cries of pain sounded like maniacal laughter. It shook Sirius to the core.

"Tell me, how does it feel?" she croaked chokingly as Dorcas paused for a moment. It took Sirius a moment to understand that Bellatrix was talking to him.

"How does it feel?"; she repeated. "To be betrayed like that? By your *dearest* friend?"

Sirius didn't answer.

"Did it break your little heart? Did it hurt nicely? Oh, I hope it ruined you properly, you treacherous little r-"

"Shut up!" Sirius slapped the table so hard he was startled by it himself. But it still didn't have the desired effect.

"Yet you don't even know the whole truth," she said, a euphoric glint in her eye, as if she had been waiting to say that all along.

"What truth?" asked Sirius, still feeling the pulsing pain emanating from his hand.

"Don't, Sirius," Dorcas admonished him. "She's just trying to provoke you."

Bellatrix, meanwhile, pretended Dorcas didn't exist. "About the werewolf. What happened to him."

"What's supposed to have happened to him? He made his decision." Sirius stared at Bellatrix with a dull expression, trying not to let her widened eyes upset him further.

"No," she whispered meaningfully. "The Dark Lord made the decision for him."

"I swear to you, if you don't start talking straight..."

"In the very beginning, he didn't want to work with us at all. He said he'd rather die, the drama queen. We changed his mind."

"Sirius, listen-" began Dorcas, but Sirius barely heard her voice. Suddenly he felt ice cold.

"How?" he asked quietly, the three letters tasting like poison.

"Oh," Bellatrix shrugged casually, "by torturing him until he lost his mind. After that he was very cooperative."

Before his eyes, Bellatrix's satisfied, greedy face seemed to blur for a moment.

"I know." Bellatrix's laughter echoed in his head. "That's even more

awesome than your version, isn't it? Even more tragic, even better."

"Stop it," he said. And he meant it. It was all lies anyway. She was trying to take him down, to get him off his guard. He wasn't going to let that happen to him.

Dorcas reached out to him verbally. "Don't think we're buying it. Remus was very much still in his right mind. And when is this supposed to have happened anyway?"

"Last year, at the end of February. I remember it like it was yesterday. We kidnapped him, on his patrol with that ugly Auror Moody."

Panic spread through Sirius. The images flooded in on him, the wounds, the fear, his accounts of the horrible torture....

"Voldemort cleansed him." She sounded delighted. "Wiped out his weak mind and gave him a new one. One that knows what's right."

"You're lying," Sirius snarled, but it didn't make the cold, panic any better. He felt like he couldn't breathe.

"Look at me and tell me again that I'm lying," Bellatrix said, unusually sternly. "You know I'm not."

Sirius paused.

She was right. She wasn't lying. She didn't need to. Her honesty made up a large part of her cruelty.

She must have seen the realisation on his face, because she looked pleased.

"You should have seen him. Your poor, innocent werewolf. The way he whimpered, begged for it to end..."

"Shut up." Everything was numb. There were thoughts invading him now, alongside all the images. They were far too clear, he was far too sober, he couldn't bear it.

It couldn't be true.

"And when I was done with him, all that was left of him was a drooling, mindless shell. It was beautiful."

"Shut up," Sirius repeated weakly. He prayed for Dorcas to put an end to it, to torture her until she could no longer speak. But the only thing

Dorcas said, after a long silence, was:

"So the Remus we knew no longer exists at all?"

Bellatrix shook her head. "He's gone." Then she cast an almost motherly glance at Sirius. "So don't mind the betrayal, little cousin. It wasn't anything personal. He doesn't even know you."

Remus hadn't betrayed him.

Remus had died rather than betray him.

Remus had died.

First it was the numbness. Then, at some point, came the grief, then the guilt. And finally, blind, all-consuming hatred.

Sirius leapt up, delusional, like a rabid animal. Lunged at Bellatrix, lashing out at her, throwing every curse he knew at her. It wasn't enough, he wanted her to suffer, he wanted her to....

A punch, a mad screech and blackness, just for a few seconds. When he opened his eyes again, the chair in front of him was empty and Bellatrix stood looming over him. How had she...?

A kick to the pit of his stomach. Another scream, angry this time, from Dorcas. Scramble above him, a flash of white, a cry of pain. Footsteps, a door, silence.

"Fuck, Sirius!" moaned Dorcas in agony. "Are you out of your fucking mind? You gave me extra... warning not to get too close to her."

Sirius didn't reply. His stomach roared in pain, his body convulsed uncontrollably. But his mind was empty.

Dorcas struggled to get to her feet. "We had *Bellatrix fucking Lestrange*! And because of you, she got away ! How are we going to find Remus now?"

That almost made Sirius laugh.

"I don't care," he whispered harshly. "I don't want to find him anymore."

That wasn't Remus. Remus was dead. This was just some stranger they'd sent after Sirius, the biggest weak link in the Order. An soulless puppet he had loved, in whose arms he had lain, to whom he had revealed his greatest weaknesses. How much it must have amused him. How pathetic he must have found it. How hard it must have been for him to endure his love. The ultimate sacrifice, for his true master, Voldemort.

"Don't talk shit," Dorcas snorted. "Get up, we're not giving up on this now."

Sirius didn't get up. Didn't have the strength in any muscle in his body to do so anymore.

He was done. He didn't want any more. It was too much.

He didn't get up.

***

The shards in the trash, the pictures burned

I pour gasoline on your things in the closet

The fire was bright, the city was on fire

It was like medicine, because since you I'm sick

Sirius always thought he had already experienced the worst possible thing.

To be betrayed by the love of his life and realise that it was all an act from the start? Almost unbearable.

But to learn that there had once been a Remus who might even have loved him back? That there had once been a chance of happiness in the midst of this hell? And to realise that he had then been driven into

the hands of the enemy, because Sirius had pushed him away out of selfishness?

To learn that he was gone, because of that?

That was so, so much worse.

It was a short, unadorned ceremony. Sirius had gathered the first branches he found in the sparse patch of woodland. He leaned a few of them together, a bit of tinder in the middle and then, with the help of his wand, lit a fire. It burned immediately, the dry wood seemed to have been waiting for a spark. Just as he had imagined.

He stared into the flames for a while. He was too drunk to think much, but somehow the fire did make him feel a little melancholic.

"I have something to show you, Padfoot." Remus's eyes gleamed in the fire of the common room, twinkling as if it were Christmas. Sirius suspected evil.

"Please, not some weird Muggle stuff again," he pleaded.

Remus looked at him piqued, folding his arms. "This isn't weird muggle stuff! It's art!"

"Art gets framed and hung on the wall." Sirius knew what he was talking about. Back home in Grimmauld Place, there were countless invaluable examples hanging.

"What are you, eighty?" Remus rolled his eyes. "Only a pureblood could say something like that."

Sirius punched him in the side. "Watch your mouth."

Remus stuck his tongue out at him.

"So, what do you want to show me?" asked Sirius, defeated.

Remus seemed to have been waiting for just that. He bent over the couch,

pulled his stupid record player onto his lap and turned it on. Grinning, he lowered the needle onto the record and immediately loud rock music blared through the common room. He would be lucky if this time no fifth-grader smacked him for disturbing his studies.

"That's my absolute favourite band!", Remus fluted enthusiastically, his cheeks red with excitement. "Trust me, you'll love them too."

Sirius listened to it sceptically. Admittedly... it didn't sound so bad.

"That guy's got a pretty cool voice."

Remus nodded enthusiastically, grinning up to his ears. "Doesn't he?! He's great. Marc Bolan's his name, he's the best."

Remus's euphoria was a bit funny, after all. It made Sirius keep listening, even until the record had run through at some point. After that, Sirius looked around unobtrusively and when he couldn't see anyone, he finally leaned over to Remus and whispered:

"Can we listen to it one more time?"

Remus looked like he wanted to throw his arms around Sirius's neck. Luckily, though, he was too cool for that. At least there was one thing they agreed on for once.

Sirius looked at his wand for a while. Twirled it in his hands, thinking of all he'd been through with it. How many times it had saved his life.

And yet he was the tool of Death Eaters, monsters, murderers. It was cursed. And not just the one in his hand, every single wand. The whole magical world was hell. It was a world where people like Remus and Marlene and Edgar and Euphemia and Fleamont and so many others had to die in agony. It was an ulcer. It made people sick, it devoured everything and everyone eventually. Most were just too stupid to see it.

But Sirius realized it now. He'd had enough. Following an impulse, he clasped his wand with both hands, tensed his forearms and snapped it in two. It felt great. He threw the two fragments into the fire, where they immediately began to burn brightly. That was even better.

For a moment, the warmth of the fire reached his core. There wasn't much left to warm up, but it still felt good. Maybe that was how it was going to burn itself into his memory. After all, it was the product of the last spell Sirius would ever cast. A lovely thought.

At home, bleak darkness and packed suitcases awaited Sirius. Without a wand in his pocket, he felt like he could breathe again, for the first time in weeks.

His guitar case on his back and two large suitcases in his hands, he left the flat. Finally, irreversibly.

He did not look back.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Wenn du weinst/When you Cry' by Lostboi Lino (man, this one fits so fucking much)

This poor soul needs a hug so bad. But remember the lyrics back in chapter 5? Clinging onto that lmao.

So, we're already in act 3, but this chapter feels like another big cut for me. You will see why in the next chapter. ;)

Man sieht sich, Ihr Süßen!

Chapter 46: Iron

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A soldier on my own, I don't know the way

I'm riding up the heights of shame

I'm waiting for the call, the hand on the chest

I'm ready for the fight, and fate

10 months later

June 1981

Remus was no longer as good an actor as Regulus, admittedly. The straight-faced lying, the relaxed smiles, the lightness of it all - it didn't come naturally anymore. It seemed like finally getting all his feelings back did come at a price.

Of course, it was a price he was happy to pay; it had been hard work

to get this far, after all. But with the mission he was currently pursuing, that could lead to complications.

Fortunately, for now, no one in the room seemed to notice how much he wanted to punch Rabastan Lestrange in the face.

"You're so funny, Lupin," Rabastan bawled, patting him a little too hard on the shoulder. "Why didn't we hang out before?"

The smile Remus put on felt painful. "I don't know. But we really should do it more often." He glanced around the Black family meeting room, where attendees were trickling in slowly. Casually, he leaned towards Rabastan and whispered. "Let's roam around London for a bit after this lame meeting. Maybe we'll find some muggles we can really rough up."

Rabastan giggled like the silly little child he was. "That sounds good. I didn't have anything planned for tonight anyway."

"Very good. Looking forward to it." Remus would rather spend the next few hours with a horde of Inferi than with Rabastan. But then again, what wouldn't one do when Regulus Black asked for it.

Fortunately, Rodolphus Lestrange relieved him shortly afterwards by entering the room with weighty steps and clearing his throat noisily.

"Good evening," he said curtly once he was at his place at the table. "The Dark Lord sends his apologies this evening, he has an important engagement."

That was the sign for Remus to switch off. Over the last few months they had met so often that Remus spent most meetings on autopilot. Especially when Voldemort wasn't around. And he had enough on his plate trying to charm Rabastan anyway.

"It's supposed to be rather quick today, too." Rodolphus held a parchment in his hand, which he kept peering at. "*Operation Aithon* last Tuesday was a success. A dedicated debriefing with those involved has already taken place, but here's the short version again for the rest: the targets were successfully eliminated, and we even managed to take out one of the Order members in the subsequent battles with them."

That was the only thing that brought Remus out of his trance for the most part, briefly. The horror, the implication behind those words.

Each time, he then saw Sirius's, James's or Lily's dead body flash before him.

"He's been identified as Caradoc Dearborn." Remus couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. Even if he hated himself for it.

"Meanwhile, the overall decline in clashes with the Order continues. They have obviously thinned out considerably by now. They won't be a problem for us much longer."

Appreciation again, almost enthusiasm. Remus switched off again.

"Beyond that, we're expecting a letter from the Minister of Magic herself in the next few weeks... She's going to try to make a deal with us because the noose is tightening around her."

Opposition flared to Remus's left and right, loudest from Rabastan.

"No way are we negotiating with her!" he shouted. Remus wondered if it was ramblings like these that were the key to Rabastan's trust.

Just as he was thinking of the most vulgar way to talk about Muggles to impress Rabastan, a snippet of Rodolphus's sentence brought him back out of his thoughts.

"... For our biggest operation to date, *Operation Kratía*."

To punctuate his words, he waved his wand and projected a bright blue image of the Ministry of Magic's entrance hall into the air. Remus's flowery insults fizzled out into nothingness.

"Kratía?" asked Avery, frowning like almost everyone else at the table. It was the first time Remus had heard of it, too. And such fancy aliases never meant anything good.

Rodolphus laid the parchment on the table and raised his arms solemnly. "The dark lord asked me to hold back on information, as this honour should be his. But I can tell you in advance, it's going to be big. It's going to be beautiful. And it will finally change the world for the better."

He waved his wand again and the projection changed. The architecture of the entrance hall changed, the statue of the Minister of Magic collapsed and a new one created itself from the remains. It had the face of Voldemort.

"It will be the last summer of lies," Rodolphus announced in a loud voice. "In just a few weeks, the Ministry will be ours. And then law and order will finally be restored."

Approving roars, scattered applause. Remus stared at the statue of Voldemort looking down on them all.

Operation Kratía. At the end of the summer already.

That didn't sound good at all.

***

"What do you mean we only have a few more weeks?" asked Regulus in just as much panic as Remus had imagined. "He didn't even find Harry yet, why is he planning a fucking coup d'état all of a sudden?"

Remus shrugged, glancing at the fading bruise on Regulus's cheek that reminded him of their last near-death experience with the Fiendfyre.

"I don't know any details yet. Rodolphus only vaguely announced it. You know what he's like."

Regulus shook his head in disbelief and lowered himself onto the stool beside his potion cauldron. "This is a bloody disaster. We're not even close with the remaining Horkruxes... We'll never make it in the time we have left."

"I can't help it either, Reg," Remus said. "I'm on to Rabastan, and I'm telling you, I'm really giving this boy all the sanity I have left."

That made Regulus smirk. "That bad?"

"Don't ask." Remus leaned against the doorframe of the study. "He's so stinking stupid, it hurts me to talk to him."

"Yeah, Rabastan was never the very smartest."

"Today alone I spent three hours apparating around London with him, doing nothing but stupid shit. Just to make him think I like him."

"Has he invited you back to his place yet?"

"No," Remus rubbed his temples. "But I don't think it'll be long now."

"Well, even if they're stupid enough to keep the cup in their house, you won't be able to just take it."

"We'll deal with that when I'm finally in this fucking house," Remus waved it off. If they factored in all the contingencies right now, they might as well give up. Their goal had become utopian anyway with this operation breathing down their necks.

"How's progress with the other Horcrux?" asked Remus. Regulus just sighed.

"Oh, that bad," Remus concluded. "Then you don't need to talk about it. Let's concentrate on the Lestranges."

"I'd prefer that too," Regulus muttered, but it was obvious that his mind was racing. Remus already sensed that he would be woken up a few times over the night because Regulus was doing some noisy research in the next room.

"Don't worry so much, Reg," Remus tried to reassure him. "We'll manage. We found the others too."

"Yes," Regulus said bitterly. "But they took us almost a year. And nearly fucking *killed* us, if you still recall."

"Well, we've had practice then."

Regulus looked at him, annoyed, then rolled his eyes.

"I need to go to bed now though," Remus stifled a yawn. "This day was hell. You better not take too much longer either, we'll deal with this tomorrow."

"Good night," Regulus murmured, his gaze wandering thoughtfully to his oversized bookshelf. Remus already knew he wasn't going to listen to him.

"Reg," he sighed, exhausted. "Well, at least cast a spell so I can't hear you. You're not the quietest."

"Got it." Regulus stood up and went to the shelf, fishing a thick book from the bottom shelf. Remus suppressed a sigh and left the study.

Living with Regulus was strange. Even though they got along well by now and the hut was big enough for everyone to have their place of retreat, Remus sometimes still felt like an intruder.

As helpful as Regulus was, as interested and self-sacrificing, he was also a very distant person. Someone who liked to be by himself for most of the time. Who didn't really let anyone get close to him. Remus accepted that, but there were moments when he wished it were different. When he wished he had a shoulder to lean on when the thoughts got too much. When the longing for Sirius became too much

One thing Remus had to give Regulus credit for, for all his noisy night activity, was his determination. When he had a task, he worked at it for hours, days, weeks, tirelessly. There was something inspiring about it, too. It had gotten Remus through the winter. Even through the darkest, loneliest days.

Exhausted, he dropped into bed and covered himself tentatively. It was too warm to really use a blanket, but Remus needed the feeling anyway.

Although his bed was at the other end of the room, he could hear it rumbling in Regulus's study. Annoyed, he grabbed his wand on the bedside table and accidentally swept a few notes onto the floor with it. He muttered the silencing spell and was satisfied that the rumbling stopped. Hopefully the spell would last long enough for him to fall asleep.

He put his wand back and picked up the notes from the floor. They were mainly a few illegible notes Remus had made to himself while half asleep, some of which he couldn't even remember. In between, however, he found two photos of his pocket camera, the only two he still had. The ones he had always carried with him, even when he hadn't wanted to admit their importance to him. The one of Sirius and the one of him and Marlene.

Sirius's had become dog-eared and slightly smudged, so many times Remus had held it in his hands now. Still, it stabbed him like a knife in his guts every time. That carefree, wide grin that Remus had loved so much. The one he would probably never see again.

By now he had realized that he could never make up for what he had done to Sirius. He had not only betrayed him, he had broken him,

systematically, over many months. Presumably, even without betrayal, it wouldn't have taken much longer for Sirius to break. Who wouldn't have, in that situation?

His gaze, the last one before Remus had disappeared into the dark streaks from Godric's Hollow a year ago, still haunted him every night in his sleep. Remus had had it coming to him. It was the least he could do to atone. It was not nearly enough.

Before it could get too much for him, he put the picture of Sirius away and looked at Marlene instead. Lately he was finding it harder and harder to look at her too. He didn't know where it came from, why it was so much harder for him now than it had been a year ago. As if now that he had put distance between himself and Voldemort and all the chaos, the true certainty was settling over him. About what he had done. What he hadn't stopped. Perhaps it could be called belated grief. A strange grief, without tears or pain. But with all the more guilt.

He hurriedly put the picture away and let himself sink back into his pillow. Once again, the ceiling was not merciful to him. Even when he turned off the light, he could still clearly see the crossbars, which were, as always, the projection screen for many of his most hidden thoughts and feelings. Remus quickly closed his eyes.

"That's it." Marlene picked up the transformation book and threw it swingingly against the large tapestry in the common room. "I give up. I'm going to fail."

Remus watched the book as it landed on the floor and flipped open on some page. A reminder. 'You're not done studying.'

"Wow, so theatrical now?" He smiled wryly at Marlene from the side and patted her forearm.

Defiantly, she pulled it away. "I'm serious. The exams are in two weeks. I don't know anything yet. I'm going to fuck this up so bad. And then I'll end up on the street because no one will take me without a degree-"

"Now don't get carried away, Marls," Remus sighed. He too was tired and annoyed and wanted nothing more than to have a smoke, but it wasn't that bad yet.

"Why do they put us through so much?" Marlene ran a hand through her stringy blonde hair and rubbed her eyes. "How did they all manage it in the years before?"

"That's just what I wonder." Remus looked out the window to relax his eyes. "Just think, even people like Bellatrix Lestrange or the lazy Prewetts managed it. It can't really be that hard."

"But it's so much." Marlene sounded exasperated. "I can't even get down playing Quidditch anymore, all my thoughts are spinning around it. I thought the last few weeks before graduation were supposed to be enjoyed."

"Me too." Remus sighed and looked at Marlene encouragingly. "But you'll get through it. And I'm not just saying that. You can do anything Marlene. You're not the type to give up."

Marlene looked at him sceptically. "Since when did you become such a slimeball?"

"Remember last year when you guys were down 90 against the Ravenclaws? Even James had written the game off. But you kept going relentlessly."

"Yeah, we still lost," Marlene said dryly.

"That's not the point," Remus retorted, trying to stifle his laughter. "It's about willpower. And you still got fifty points out of it for Gryffindor."

"Cute story. But how does it help me pass the NEWTs?"

Remus sighed. New strategy. "You need to keep a cool head. Well, you might not manage an 'outstanding' everywhere, so what? It doesn't matter. You're better than those stupid grades. And who cares what you got in 'History of Magic' in school."

He rummaged in his pocket and put a bar of chocolate next to her notes. "And I can recommend these to you if it gets really bad. They calm you down. Well, me at least."

That elicited a smile from Marlene. "You're sweet, thank you."

"IWe could also go for a walk. Always clears the head..."

At that moment a loud rumble was heard from the stairwell and a second later Sirius trudged into the common room. He held Remus's pocket camera in his hand and grinned widely when he saw them both sitting on the

couch.

"Hey there, you two. Studying hard?"

"Yeah," Remus replied curtly, raising an eyebrow. "Aren't you supposed to be as well?"

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that," he waved it off and pointed at the camera in his hand. "Can I borrow that? Want to get out for a bit, take some pictures."

"Sure," Remus said, then nudged Marlene. "See, just do like Sirius. Just shit on everything."

Marlene snorted in amusement. "The unfair thing is, the idiot always gets away with it too."

"I can hear you two."

"Good," Remus smiled. Sirius returned the look, playfully offended, then something seemed to occur to him. "Come on you sweeties, one smile for me."

"Please don't, I look awful," Marlene said hurriedly, raising her hands to her face as if she were besieged by paparazzi.

"Oh no you don't," Sirius placated, raising the camera to his face. "Come on Moony, a little cooperation please."

Remus sighed in annoyance and finally gave up. Gently, he put an arm around Marlene, who also seemed to surrender to her fate.

"Oh, you're so cute," Sirius chirped, snapping the photo.

"You must never develop that," Marlene whispered to him. "Promise me."

Remus laughed. "Sure. I swear."

"Well then, you two have fun studying. I'm enjoying a bit of freedom."

He winked at Remus and moved away. It was stupid and silly and over the top, but even that little gesture gave Remus heart palpitations. He was truly lost.

To make matters worse, Marlene nudged him, her mischievous grin on. "There's my tomato again. Missed it already."

"Shut up," Remus pushed her away. "Better pick up your book again, we've got a lot of stuff to do."

Remus startled out of sleep. Took a deep breath, struggling for direction, for Marlene's face to disappear. It took longer than it should.

Drawn out, crystal clear memories like that were haunting him regularly now. Remus still didn't remember most of his past, but he remembered *some* things. Most of them, though, only brought him more pain and misery. It was like looking at a once beautiful painting that he himself had ruined beyond repair.

He glanced at the small window through which dusk was already creeping. Groaning in annoyance, he stretched, releasing some tension from his body and ran a hand over his face. He was completely wet with sweat, as if after a nightmare. Well, in a way, it had been a nightmare.

Knowing that he would certainly not fall back asleep, he swung his legs out of bed and propped his elbows on his knees. Little by little everything came back, the operation, the Horcrux crisis, his *date* with Rabastan yesterday. There were nicer things to wake up to. Remus decided to follow his past self's advice and go for a walk. One last glance at the bedside table also told him his destination.

***

Marlene's grave was well tended. Just like the last time he visited with Sirius, the small bed was immaculate and the stone looked almost polished. Someone came by here very often.

It was wonderfully quiet. Remus had pulled a cap deep into his face for safety's sake, but at this time of day, with the first rays of sun just over the horizon, he didn't have to expect many people anyway. The grass next to his shoes was still dew-covered, just like the small wreath that had been placed against the gravestone, gleaming faintly in the morning light. Her name was inscribed just a few inches above the wreath, black on grey, a memorial, almost a threat. Remus felt the sudden need to explain himself.

"Hey," he whispered softly, feeling silly about it. He looked around to be sure no one was around before continuing quietly. "I thought I'd stop by."

He clasped his hands in front of him, simply so he had something to hold on to. He took another step closer, speaking even more softly.

"I know I haven't been here in a long time. I... have been struggling a lot with myself." Was it fair to say that? And was the fight really over yet?

"I just wanted to show that I haven't forgotten you... And I know I don't have the right to tell you this, but I'm really sorry." Remus cleared his throat in embarrassment. He really was pathetic.

"I didn't mean for this to happen to you, I hope you know that." Remus closed his eyes. "You dying was pointless and unnecessary." He paused for a moment, shaking off his old thought pattern. "So was your mother and father's deaths. They deserved to live on just as much. They were great people."

The more he talked, the worse it got. He felt like the biggest impostor, the biggest liar and cheat. What was he actually doing here? Did he think this made up for it? A few empty words at a cold grave, two years too late? A disgrace.

Remus suppressed the words he still wanted to say. They were meaningless anyway.

You do not die in the heart.

The words on the gravestone drilled into his head. He stared at them until his eyes went dry and burned. Again he looked at the wreath, which could not have been more than a day or two old. It was thickly studded with pink chrysanthemums. They would probably have been too tacky for Marlene's taste, but Remus thought they suited her perfectly. A small white bow stuck out from between the blossoms, its ends hanging down lazily. On closer inspection, Remus saw that one of the ends had something handwritten on it.

But my heart dies without you.

Remus took a step back. He didn't know the handwriting, but he knew exactly who it was from. For a moment he was back at the funeral, seeing her exhausted, haggard face, the hatred in her eyes. It was Dorcas who came here every day. Suddenly he felt like a stain on her

grave. Occupying the place that belonged to someone who had really loved her sincerely and had not just come crawling up with a guilty conscience because he had nightmares.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again and then turned on the spot and hurried away. That had been a shit idea.

***

"I'm telling you, Muggles can't do many things, but they're really good at beer," Rabastan slurred and toasted Remus again unnecessarily. "For that reason alone, I think the Dark Lord's plan is great, not to kill them all, but to make them slaves. Otherwise, it wouldn't even exist!"

"Yeah, totally agree with you there," Remus smiled and took a small sip himself. London Pride. Bad memories.

"Also the clothes and stuff. They often look like circus costumes, but there are some good ones too! Like with those collars and the hairdos."

"Mhm," Remus nodded. What the hell was the boy talking about?

"What do you think? What's Operation Kratía going to be like?" With curious eyes, Rabastan looked at him and had leaned in. Unobtrusively, Remus leaned back to escape the beastly smell of alcohol.

"Something big. We'll find out when the Dark Lord returns from his journey at the latest."

"I hope it won't be long!" Rabastan emptied his beer and put it in the half-empty crate that stood between them. Seamlessly, he took out the next bottle. What was he planning to do today?

"I'm sure it won't." Remus leaned back in his chair, wondering if now was the right time. He should ask before he was too drunk to remember the next day. But wasn't it a bit early for that? Remus had only been hanging out with him for a few weeks. Then again, they had no choice. The clock was ticking.

"Hey, what do you think," he began casually. "It's kind of boring just

hanging around here all the time. Don't you live in some huge super mansion?"

Rabastan chuckled. "Yes, it's gigantic. But three generations of my family live there, including my brother and Bella. So there's a lot going on."

"I'd love to see it sometime," Remus gushed like a fucking toddler. "I bet it's really impressive. Better than here." He cast a snide glance around the living room and, to his delight, earned an approving nod.

"Yeah, it's pretty depressing here. Tradition .." Rabastan seemed to be thinking. "I don't know if my parents would like it, they don't like visitors..."

"Oh, I'm very easy to handle," Remus continued. "Otherwise, I'll just come over when your parents are away and can't be bothered with me." He looked at Rabastan pleadingly. "I'd get the beer for that, too, then."

Sadly, it was that last part that seemed to convince him. "Doesn't sound bad, I must say." He took a big gulp. "Maybe I'll find a good moment when they won't bug me."

"That would be great! Then we could talk in peace and not always have this passing traffic..."

As if Remus had conjured it up, Evan Rosier came stomping into the living room at that moment. His expression was grim, but when he caught sight of Remus, it became even grimmer. Well, Remus couldn't blame him.

"Rabastan, there you are," he grumbled, his gaze shifting suspiciously between him and Remus. "If you ... have a moment, come with me, I have something important to discuss with you."

"Heyy, Evan, good to see you!" greeted Rabastan good-humouredly and toasted him. Evan's gaze fell on the beer and the crate between them and hardened further.

"You know what, just forget it," he hissed and turned on his heel.

Rabastan grimaced, the way that drunks grimace when they've done something stupid.

"Wow," Remus commented. "Someone was in a bad mood. Was it

because of me?"

Rabastan shook his head. "Nah, don't worry... He's a bit off. Ever since Barty's disappeared."

"Excuse me?"

Rabastan frowned. "Since Barty disappeared. Haven't you noticed? He hasn't been to any of the recent meetings. No one knows where he is."

Feverishly, Remus thought back to the last meetings. He had been so preoccupied with the Horcruxes that he hadn't paid any attention. But now that Rabastan said it....

Fuck.

"When did that happen? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Rabastan pondered. "A few weeks ago, I think. But why do you even care? Never saw you guys hanging out, thought you didn't like him, just like with Evan."

Why hadn't he noticed that? Rabastan was right of course, he had no connection with Barty. But Regulus did. And he had asked him more than once to check that he was okay. He would freak out.

"And there's no sign of him? So they don't even know if he's run off or been arrested?"

"Anything is possible. He hasn't been himself since Reggie died anyway. Took too much of a toll on him. Maybe he just didn't want to go on, the idiot. Maybe the Ministry caught him, since they found out his identity." He drank and then cleared his throat noisily. "Evan, however, doesn't believe any of it. He thinks he's with his father."

"His father?" Remus froze.

"Yeah, the bastard. Right arsehole. Evan thinks his own father took him. But I don't know how much there is to it."

Remus shook his head in disbelief. "And no one's doing anything about it? What does Voldemort say about it?"

"Barty's done a lot of shit in the last few months, surely you've noticed. And the Dark Lord's got a lot on his plate right now. There's no time for him to worry about that sort of thing."

Remus mechanically put down his bottle and stood up. "Hey, sorry, I just remembered something else. I've got to go."

Rabastan looked at him with wide eyes.

"Already? We've only just started."

"Yeah, I'm really sorry." Remus's mind raced. "I'll make it up to you."

"I hope so, Remy!" he chortled, and he was so glad Remus was busy with something else right now, or he really would have caught a punch.

He hurried out of the living room, already thinking about the best way to break it to Regulus gently. However, he prepared himself for the worst.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Iron' by Woodkid

So, the horkrux hunt is on!!
When I was first drafting the story in my head I thought about the search for and destruction of every single Horkrux. But I ultimately decided against writing out all of it, since I didn't want to rewrite TDH and it is not what this story, at its core, is about. So, to somehow find a balance in all that, I passed over a part of the hunt and will handle the rest to an extent you'll see in the next chapters 😊
Just so you know!
Also: Nagini doesn't exist in this fic, simply because I have a phobia of snakes and I don't want to do this to myself :) So we're dealing with a total of five horkruxes.

Hope you liked the chapter <3

See ya!!

Chapter 47: The Labyrinth Song

Chapter Notes

CW Blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh Ariadne, I'm coming, I just need to work this maze inside my mind

I wish I had that string, it's so damn dark, I think I'm going blind

Oh Ariadne, I just need to work this maze inside my mind

For the life of me I don't remember what I came to find

Regulus had known Barty since his first day at Hogwarts. In the evening, directly after being sorted in by the Sorting Hat, he had sat next to him in the Great Hall. He had been so immensely relieved to have ended up in Slytherin that he had struck up a conversation with him, even though he never normally spoke to strangers.

They had become friends that very evening. And had never stopped being so since.

Not even when he and Barty had had their first big fight in second year, when Regulus had stolen Barty's place on the Quidditch team. Not even when Barty had started prioritising drugs over their friendship in fifth year. Not when Regulus had secretly started dating James.

Nor when Regulus had joined the Death Eaters and Barty hadn't wanted to at first. Not even when Regulus had withdrawn more and more and pushed everyone he cared about away from him.

Not even when they had slept together.

At least he was still trying to convince himself of that.

***

"We have to save him." It wasn't a question, it wasn't an idea. It was a fact. No less set in stone than the fact that Regulus would find and destroy every last Horcrux.

"I know," Remus murmured, sounding less than enthusiastic. "But how? We don't know where he is."

"Yes, we do," Regulus said tersely. "I'm absolutely convinced his father got hold of him."

Remus looked at him irresolutely, then finally sighed. "Does that mean it's not enough to break into one super heavily guarded old wizard's mansion, but we'll do it twice?"

"Trust me, compared to the Crouchs' house, the Lestranges' is a barrier-free child's paradise."

Remus grimaced in agony. "What are we talking about?"

"Bartemius Crouch Sr. is suffering from paranoia. No one gets in there just like that. And we can forget about such gimmicks as Polyjuice Potion, Invisibility or Imperius. None of that will work."

"Where is this house, Azkaban?"

If Regulus hadn't felt like crying, he would have laughed.

Remus looked at him with wide eyes. "Reg, don't scare me."

"I'm just being realistic."

"Then how are we going to get him out of there? Next to all that Horcrux crap?"

Regulus rubbed his eyes strained. They burned from hours of poring over books and writings.

"I don't know," he admitted to himself. And it felt awful.

***

Regulus liked to solve problems. For him, there was something meditative about laying out the characteristics of the problem, its pitfalls, its obstacles, and struggling through step by step. With the Gaunt Ring and the diary it had worked wonderfully, even if Regulus and Remus had faced a seemingly insoluble task at the beginning. All the effort, all the hair-raising had been worth it in the end, when the Horkruxes had burnt up before them in unquenchable fire.

But right now all the problems were slowly getting the better of him. He noticed it in the stabbing headache, the long latency to fall asleep, the way he kept dissociating, almost for minutes at a time. They were missing crucial clues to the last two Horcruxes, even though they only had a few weeks left. And every second Barty spent longer in his father's clutches settled like lead on his conscience.

With effort, he forced himself to stand up from his uncomfortable stool. He stretched his stiff limbs, pushed the greasy strands of hair behind his ears. As his gaze fell on the door, he noticed the bowl waiting for him there on the floor. He remembered that Remus had come in over an hour ago and brought him food. He had completely forgotten about it.

Awkwardly, he walked to the door and took the bowl. He wasn't hungry, but he knew he hadn't eaten all day, so he forced himself to swallow a few bites. While he ate, he went into the living room area of the hut and found Remus there, who seemed to be taking stock of their medical equipment. The contents of the medicine cabinet were spread out before him on the floor, ointments, bandages, pills, tourniquets. It surprised Regulus every time to see how much Remus still relied on all the Muggle stuff for such matters.

"What are you doing?" asked Regulus, his mouth half full.

Remus looked up in surprise and the hint of a smile settled on his lips. "Hey, good to see you. Tomorrow's the full moon. Won't be going to Grimmauld Place this time though, find me some other forest or something where there's not a soul. I'll need a little something to sustain me there."

"Why no Grimmauld Place this time?" Regulus took another bite.

"I can't stand it there right now. They're all going crazy with Operation Kratía and Rabastan's giving me the rest. I'd rather patch myself up in the forest before I spend another night in that cellar."

"Why don't you do it here," Regulus suggested. "That's what the hut

was originally intended for anyway, isn't it? I don't mind, I can fuck off for the night or lock myself up somewhere. And in the morning I could tend to your wounds."

Remus looked at him thoughtfully. "You don't have to. It's not very... nice to look at. And I don't want to put you in danger."

Regulus snorted as his gaze fell on the tourniquet again. "So if you accidentally sever your aorta in a werewolf frenzy, you're going to put the tourniquet on yourself?"

Remus rolled his eyes. "I don't think it won't come to that."

"It's no big deal. I know this is super private for you and I respect that. But I think you and I have known each other long enough. Besides, if anything else happens to you now, we can really forget it."

Remus mused. "But really, only if you're okay with that. And we have a safe place for you."

"Sure." Regulus set the bowl down on the kitchen counter. "Now clean up that useless Muggle stuff."

"Yeah yeah." Regulus loved winning an argument. But his satisfaction didn't last too long this time.

"Hey, do you have some time right now?" he asked Remus cautiously as he put the equipment back in the cupboard.

"Sure."

"Good," Regulus said, finally getting over what he had been putting off all day. "Would you join me then, please? I need to take a closer look at the Crouch mansion."

***

The estate was obscene in size, even by the standards of a venerable wizarding family. It stood in the clearing of a small spruce forest, a wide, paved avenue leading to a sprawling courtyard where, among all manner of magical vehicles, stood a black Bentley, presumably brought here merely for decorative purposes. The mansion itself was three storeys high, with large, ornate windows and marble columns

supporting the covered veranda. It would probably make even *his* family envious.

It was even worse than Regulus had feared. He saw the protective screens even at first glance, flickering faintly in the sun, seeming to laugh at anyone who even thought of breaking in. It was unthinkable. They would need all of the Death Eaters to do it, including Voldemort, to even scratch that. And not just two overtired misfits.

Sighing heavily, Regulus propped himself up against one of the slender spruce trees that offered them the necessary cover from view. His head began to rattle again.

"Are those guards outside the front door?" asked Remus in alarm, squinting his eyes strained.

"Yes, they are." A full-on catastrophe.

"Oh shit," Remus voiced his thoughts a little more aptly. "How is this going to work?"

I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

Regulus looked to the impregnable fortress and thought of Barty sitting in there somewhere, locked up, alone because Regulus had been so preoccupied with himself that he had completely neglected him. His best friend, one of the few bright spots in all that time with his family. Regulus was such a selfish asshole.

He straightened up quickly when he noticed that his chest was starting to feel suspiciously tight. He didn't have time for this now, he needed to come up with a plan as soon as possible.

He felt Remus's sideways glance. "Don't worry, we'll find a solution."

The words didn't help, Regulus knew Remus didn't believe in it himself, he was just saying that because he felt his rising tension. Regulus wouldn't fall for that.

"The problem is," he began frantically. "Neither of us can just walk up there. I'm officially dead and the whole wizarding world probably knows you're a Death Eater by now. But we can't disguise ourselves or hex anyone else either, because they've probably installed some sort of protective screen that won't let anyone through at all who isn't explicitly invited... That means unless we dig ourselves a tunnel or something similarly insane, we don't stand a chance..." Regulus ruffled

his hair. What chance was there, then, anyway?

He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Easy now. Let's get out of here for now, or someone will see us."

Regulus wanted to swat the hand away, but pulled himself together.

"You're right. We should'nt draw attention."

Remus gripped his shoulder tighter and together they disapparated. When Regulus opened his eyes again, however, he saw that they were not back in their hut, but somewhere else entirely. A clear lake glistened in front of him, grass-covered hills towered against the horizon. Regulus knew the place. Sirius had shown it to him once before. In a different life.

"What are you doing?" he asked Remus, his eyebrows drawn together.

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "Just a quick change of scenery. To get down. We're going to go mad in this shitty hut if we don't look out."

"We don't have time for this!" sneered Regulus.

Remus seemingly wasn't fazed by that. "We can think here, too. There are some nice paths leading this way. We'll just walk a few steps and get the steam out of our heads. What's the big deal?"

Regulus almost disappeared in a huff, but a small part of him had to admit to himself that Remus was quite right. His nerves were so frayed by now that he probably couldn't even make the simplest connections. Maybe a bit of fresh air would do him good.

"Fine by me. But just a few minutes," Regulus sneered, stomping ahead. Remus followed him wordlessly.

"I just don't know enough about Barty's family," Regulus muttered at some point after they had walked along the path for a while, the lake to their left. Remus was walking beside him and seemed at least as preoccupied as he was.

"You never met them?"

Regulus shook his head. "Barty never wanted me to. His father always hated my family, he would have torn me to pieces. And we didn't talk about it much anyway. It was always a difficult subject."

"Well, I can understand that in a way," Remus replied thoughtfully. "When you have such a paranoid fa-" He suddenly fell silent and stopped. Regulus turned his head in his direction, taking another step or two until he saw the look on his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stopping. Remus was stiff as a board, mouth and eyes open in shock. He didn't respond.

"Remus?" Irritated, Regulus wanted to take a step towards him, but the very next moment he was seized by what felt like a whipping gust of wind. It swept him off his feet, made him crash hard onto the stony ground and groan in pain.

For a moment everything spun. Regulus braced himself and raised his head, ignoring the throbbing pain in his shoulder blades. Remus was still there, a few feet in front of him. But he was no longer standing, he was kneeling. And behind him, pointing her wand at the back of his head with deadly finality, stood Dorcas Meadowes.

"Stop!" shouted Regulus, reaching out to Remus, but Dorcas only hissed contemptuously, waved her wand and the next lash caught Regulus, knocking him to the ground again. He hit the back of his head on a stone and almost lost consciousness. Wailing pain shot through his head and paralysed him for a moment.

"Don't do it!" he managed to shout anyway, even though his whole body was crying out in pain. Full of adrenaline, he tried to stand up, but dizziness seized him and he fell back, making it no further than onto his elbows. He blinked several times until Dorcas and Remus came back into focus. Remus had frozen into a statue, the fear of death written more clearly on his face than ever before. He looked at Regulus silently, seeming to utter a silent goodbye. Dorcas looked down on Remus as if he were responsible for all the evil in the world.

"Got you at last, you disgusting bastard," she whispered menacingly. "A fucking year I've been looking for you, and yet you're so stupid as to just walk around without protection."

Remus didn't seem to know whether he was allowed to answer. Regulus mustered all his strength and pushed himself into a sitting position.

"Dorcas, please, don't rush," Regulus begged, tensing his legs tentatively. When Dorcas noticed him trying to stand up again, she pointed her wand at Regulus. "One false move and you are dead. Don't you dare approach or draw your wand."

Regulus paused in his movement, trying to get a clear thought through his throbbing head. Dorcas looked at him, with growing suspicion.

"...Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Regulus hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "No, I'm not. And there's a reason for that. Please listen to me."

"I'll be happy to listen to you when this bastard has passed on."

"No!" screamed Regulus, far too loudly. "He can't die. Otherwise we'll have no way of destroying Voldemort."

Dorcas laughed coldly, grabbed Remus by the back of the neck and rammed him into the ground with all her might. Remus cried out, squinting his eyes in pain as Dorcas pushed his face into the dirt, knelt on his back and drilled the tip of her wand into the back of his head.

"This piece of shit Death Eater is supposed to help with Voldemort's destruction? He's been doing all the dirty work for him for the past two years, hasn't he?"

"It's just... façade," Remus gasped breathlessly, groaning in pain.

"Everything about you is a façade. Your looks, your name, your past. I know the truth about you. I know what happened to the real Remus."

"You're right, of course," Regulus replied before Remus could say anything wrong. "Remus Lupin was wiped out and turned into a loyal follower of Voldemort, that's true. But he has changed. Believe me."

Dorcas scowled at him. "Do you think I'm that stupid? I've fallen for his lies long enough. That sort of brainwashing is irreparable."

"I believed that too. But I was proven wrong. I made sure he came back myself."

That gave both Dorcas and Remus pause. Regulus swallowed. He hadn't actually intended to ever tell Remus that, but if that was what saved his arse, then it was worth it.

"How?" asked Dorcas suspiciously. "How would something like that work?"

"I treated him, in secret, for many months. Developed a potion that brings back memories. I thought he was lost for a long time too, because he did really bad things and had nothing in common with the

old Remus anymore. But he did remember, some things. And his humanity has come back with it."

"We warned... the Order about Voldemort's attack..." gasped Remus. "At Godric's Hollow."

Dorcas hesitated for a moment, only to press Remus's head more firmly into the ground, so firmly that Remus whimpered softly. "And who told Voldemort their location in the first place? It was you too, wasn't it? Are you trying to play me for a fool?"

"I had no choice," Remus hissed and Regulus saw blood on his face.

"I don't believe you," Dorcas said firmly, glaring at Remus. Something about the look on her face, however, made Regulus hesitate. A thought occurred to him. It made him feel foolhardy.

"Then kill him," Regulus said lightly, and it reliably drew Dorcas's gaze to him.

"Why don't you kill him, what are you waiting for?" continued Regulus, looking at her challengingly. "You could have done it ten times by now, what's stopping you?"

She opened her mouth as if to hurl savage abuse at him, but then paused. A questioning expression flitted across her face and finally she dropped her gaze again, to the huddled figure beneath her. For a millisecond Regulus thought he saw something new in her haggard features. It almost looked like vulnerability.

"Why were you there?" she asked quietly. When Remus didn't answer, she shook him roughly. "Are you deaf!?"

"Where?" hissed Remus indignantly.

"In the graveyard. At her grave."

Remus paused for a moment. "You saw me?"

Dorcas pressed her lips together. "Yes."

At that moment, Dorcas was so fixated on Remus that Regulus might have had the chance to draw his wand. But something stopped him.

"What were you doing there?" she probed again.

"I don't know," Remus whispered, the eye that wasn't pressed into the

ground squinted slightly. "I was trying to apologise. Even though I know I don't deserve it..."

Dorcas stared at the back of his head. Pain dripped down her face, bit by bit, until it was so clear Regulus seemed to feel it himself.

"You killed her..." she whispered, "you have no right to forgiveness."

"I didn't kill her. It was Albert Crabbe, the son of a bitch. I tried to stop it. I didn't want her to die. Not even then."

Another pause. Regulus could almost see the name burning itself into Dorcas's brain. Finally, though, she snorted. "And yet you were one of the Death Eaters who ambushed her. You're partly responsible."

"I know. And I will never forgive myself for that."

Regulus saw Dorcas loosen her grip around her wand a little. Her fingers quivered. Regulus was so fixated on it that it took him a moment to realise she was looking at him.

"And what were you blathering about just now? Destroy Voldemort? What are you talking about?"

Another silken thread she threw at him. When he opened his mouth, his heart went to his throat.

"Voldemort created Horcruxes of himself, five of them. They are black magic items in which he keeps part of his soul hidden. This makes him immortal. We are tracking down these Horcruxes, we have three already. Two more to go. I can't do it without Remus. And as long as they're there, Voldemort can't die."

Dorcas looked at him as if he had just spoken in a foreign language. But she took her time to process the words and then nodded once, tucking her chin up.

"And you think I believe you because..."

"I can show you," Regulus interrupted her. "We've been working on it for months. There are books about it. We're on a good path, really. You have to believe us."

"Is that why you're pretending to be dead?"

Regulus nodded eagerly, grateful that she was at least showing cautious interest. "Bottom line, yes. It's a longer story. Nearly died

hunting the first Horcrux, Remus saved my life. I took the chance and went into hiding. That way I can concentrate on hunting the Horcruxes. And I don't have to work for Voldemort anymore."

"I see, another miraculous change of heart then?"

Regulus didn't move. "Happens. Believe it or not."

The silence that followed was long and tense. It was only briefly interrupted now and then by Remus's choked sounds and his small, pain-induced movements.

An intense exchange of glances followed. Regulus didn't know if she expected him to look away or say something clever. But Regulus did nothing of the sort. Just stared at her and hoped fervently that between all the thirst for revenge there was still a mind somewhere.

Finally, after half an eternity, she murmured, "Show me. Your work."

Regulus nodded, trying not to let the ten tons that slipped from his shoulders show. "Gladly. May I stand up?"

She nodded. In the same breath, she grabbed Remus by the shoulder and pulled him roughly back to his knees. His face looked terribly battered, completely scratched by the stones on the ground, even oozing blood in a few places. Regulus tried to make eye contact with him, but Remus seemed somewhat beside himself.

"I can apparate all three of us to the hut, if that suits. Then I'll show you my records."

And you can get a first-hand look at the mess we're in.

"Okay. But I'm warning you, if you play any games, it'll be the end of you."

"Wouldn't think of it."

Regulus cautiously approached Dorcas, who was now fully pulling Remus to his feet and watching him warily. On his way to her, Regulus wondered if it was really wise to show a member of the Order their hiding place. But what choice did they have?

He carefully grabbed her forearm and apparated with her and Remus to the hut. When they arrived, Remus stumbled badly and would have fallen if Dorcas hadn't held him. Regulus approached the entrance.

"How did you track him, anyway?" asked Regulus casually as he opened the door.

"Locating spell," she said curtly. "Moody showed me. Put it on him at the graveyard and have been waiting ever since for a suitable moment when he's not under protection."

"Oh, very clever," he admitted and led her through the hut to the study. Now with an outsider's eye on it, Regulus noticed for the first time how insane it must look. There were sheets of paper all over the wall, wild notes, pictures, question marks, books upon books. It looked like the den of a madman.

"So this is where we work on identifying and locating the Horcruxes..." he began hesitantly, pointing ramblingly at one of his A1 maps with a UTM grid where he had wildly put notes and crosses. Dorcas actually looked somewhat interested, so Regulus went on, telling her about their successes so far and their current problems. He didn't tell her about Operation Kratía yet, he had to clear that with Remus first.

"...And that's also why Remus is still active with the Death Eaters. We need that connection with them. Otherwise we're blind."

Dorcas, still holding Remus and threatening him with her wand, gave him a look of hatred, but it had lost some intensity. Remus was doing really well at playing the defenceless, remorseful mute. It was probably the only chance he had to convince Dorcas of their intentions.

When they reached the end of their 'tour', Regulus cautiously ventured into the cold water.

"Listen, I know you still don't trust us. I can totally understand that. And regardless of our intentions, that doesn't undo Remus's or my actions either. You can make us pay for it, I promise. We deserve to be punished. But first, let us take down Voldemort. We've come this far already. We can't stop now."

Regulus saw her thoughts racing. Prayed that his words would have an effect.

They stood there motionless for what felt like an eternity, Regulus at a proper distance, Remus with his shoulders slumped and his eyes downcast. Dorcas with fire in her eyes. But finally, with a defeated, unwilling groan, she pushed Remus roughly away from her and pointed her wand at him menacingly. Regulus gasped and was about

to intervene, then he heard her words:

"Don't think I trust you. I will never forgive you, you cheap knock-off. I promise you, you will atone." Then, wearily, she lowered her wand. "But I can't forgive myself either, if I might prevent Voldemort's downfall."

"That is all we ask," Regulus said, infinitely relieved. "Only a deferment of punishment."

Remus had stumbled when Dorcas had pushed him, but he had caught himself again and half turned to face her. He seemed barely able to look at her, looking down at the ground in shame and murmuring softly, "Thank you."

She just shook her head and turned away from him in disgust.

Things didn't ease up after that, but Regulus even persuaded her to stay a little longer. She sat down on one of the armchairs at a proper distance, eyeing them suspiciously like a cat that had just been abandoned in a new flat.

They talked, cautiously, tentatively. Meanwhile, Remus sat silently between them, arms folded, deep in thought. Regulus already thought he had forgotten how to speak, when he finally leaned forward, clasped his hands and looked at Dorcas warily.

"You are still in Auror training, aren't you?"

Dorcas looked at him dismissively. "Why?"

"I have a proposition for you. A trade."

"*You*?" Her eyes narrowed. Regulus's mouth went dry.

Don't say anything stupid now.

"I know you're already plotting your revenge on Albert Crabbe in your head. I'm offering to lend you a hand. I can find out where he is and help you take him out."

By now, at the latest, she seemed interested, but also increasingly suspicious.

"And what do you want in return?"

"You'd have to pull some strings at the Ministry and initiate a little house-to-house search. Because we have ample evidence that Mr. Bartemius Crouch Sr. is harbouring a wanted felon in his home."

Oh.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'The Labyrinth Song' by Asaf Avidan

That was close! Let's see whether Dorcas will really help them...

If you want you can check out my tumblr (tocotroyan), there I'll try to post some chapter-news (upload day etc...) from now on!

Hope you liked the chapter <3

See ya!

Chapter 48: Till The End Of The World

Chapter Notes

> Really tried to upload sooner but this week had me in shambles lol. But I'm dedicating most of the weekend to editing, so the next chapters might be quicker 😊
> And don't worry, soon we'll find out what happened with Sirius. Just a lot of puzzle pieces have to be put in place in preparation for the finale. Thanks for sticking with the fic! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And smiling I do once again

Exactly the opposite of what you say

It's been a long time

Sometimes they talk about you

The Ministry of Magic's Auror Office was mostly a collection of arrogant idiots. Dorcas was not yet finished with her training and therefore knew mainly the instructors, but that was enough for her. Frank, Alice and maybe Moody might be the exception, but for a large part, the Aurors' biggest battle seemed to be against their massive egos.

"Oh, Meadowes, what brings you here? Any problems with the research?", one of her instructors greeted her as she booted into his office. He reminded her that she had been given a research assignment in the first place.

"No, Mr Brown, I've come for something else." She would probably have to show more interest for a conversation with him than the entire two years before. But if this bit of acting would be a sure ticket to Albert Crabbe, she'd take even that.

"Oh, sit down then." He exuberantly pointed to the chair in front of her and she took a seat. Briefly she sorted herself and gave him an

emphatically friendly look. *Creating a welcoming atmosphere*. He returned it, somewhat hesitantly.

Brown was her best point of contact for this request. He was still quite fresh, having passed his final exams only two years ago, and accordingly was still the least corrupted by their elite mentality. Even though he was certainly well on his way to becoming one.

"What can I help you with?"

Dorcas placed her hands folded on the table, "Well, I would ask you to listen to me first, even though that might seem strange. I know all this is actually still above my authority and beyond my responsibility, but it just keeps bothering me."

That piqued his interest. With a quick movement, he adjusted his glasses and leaned forward in his chair. "All right. What's it about?"

"It was last week... We had it just a few weeks ago, didn't we, about the Death Eaters and the names we know. One of them is Bartemius Crouch Jr, right?"

Brown nodded, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

"I think I've seen him," she said, her voice quivering slightly with excitement.

"Where, and when?" The questions came out like a shot.

"Near Gringotts, twentieth of July, about noon. He was quite hooded, but I recognised him anyway, I remember him from Hogwarts..."

"And what was he doing? Where was he, where did he go?" The typical hail of Auror questions. But at least that meant he was taking her bait so far.

"He was in the bank, no idea what exactly he was doing inside. I was all alone, so I didn't trust myself to confront him. But the important thing is, he wasn't alone."

"Who was with him?" Brown had leaned so far over the desk that Dorcas was getting lumbago just from watching.

She hesitated for a moment, letting tension build. Then, cautiously, she looked around as if afraid of being overheard. "You really need to keep this confidential, though, okay? I don't want to get in trouble."

"Yeah, sure. Out with it."

She lowered her voice. "He was with his father."

Brown raised his eyebrows so high they almost seemed to disappear under his curls.

Dorcas nodded eagerly. "It was him, one hundred percent. They disappeared together at the end, too. I'm really sure. That's why I think I know where Crouch Jr. is hiding."

Brown seemed to slump a little and sat back thoughtfully.

"Those are serious accusations, Meadowes," he said quietly.

"I know. But I'm really sure. And I trust you, so I thought I could tell you. It was eating me up."

"And you can really eliminate any doubt? We're talking about one of the most important wizards in the Ministry. Who spent the whole year proving to us time and time again that he, despite his son, had nothing to do with the Death Eaters."

"Yes, really," Dorcas replied emphatically. "I'd swear to it."

"Phew." Brown seemed to continue thinking hard, but Dorcas recognised curiosity behind his eyes. It lasted only a moment, then he grabbed paper from one of his drawer compartments and began hastily making notes.

"Near Gringotts Bank, 7/20 you say?"

"Yes. I'm sure there will be other witnesses who saw them there too." Crouch Jr., at least, Regulus Black and his Polyjuice Potion had made sure of that spectacularly.

"Good, I have noted down your most important points. Please don't talk to anyone else about it for now. We will start the investigation. If there is any truth in what you say, then we will look into it."

Dorcas nodded gratefully. "Thank you for your trust," she whispered, "Please keep me informed."

Brown smiled almost paternally. "Of course."

***

It was only a week, until Brown took her aside first thing in the morning.

"You were right, Meadowes," he began excitedly. "We were able to track down three more witnesses for the day. We've also been monitoring his estate... he's definitely hiding something. And we think it might really be his son."

"I'm glad to hear that," Dorcas replied. "So what are the next steps now?"

"We're still waiting for the decision of the judge in charge. But it looks good. And if he agrees, we may search his house. But please, absolute silence about it. If he gets even the slightest whiff of it, he'll take his son away first."

"I'll keep quiet," Dorcas said, relieved that it really was going so smoothly. Even if Dorcas still wasn't too sure what Black planned to do once Crouch Jr. was in the Aurors' custody. It would only make the situation marginally better.

Brown looked at her meaningfully. "This raid is going to be a big one. We're going to need a large group to be able to proceed effectively..."

"Meaning?" Oh no, Dorcas already suspected.

"I'd like to suggest you for the group. You're almost at the end of your training, it could be your official initiation. Do you think you're up to it? You're already so good at the practical parts, I think this could be a great opportunity!"

"Oh," Dorcas made in surprise. "That would be a great honour for me. Thank you, I'd love to."

Brown patted her upper arm gratefully. "I knew I could count on you."

Then he moved off as well. And Dorcas silently slapped her hand to her face.

She should have seen it coming.

***

"I'm sorry you're caught up in this now," Regulus murmured as he thrust a cup of tea into her hand and joined her at the table. Dorcas would have preferred to avoid ever coming back to this stale hut, but as things were now, she needed to sort some things out. Luckily at least Lupin wasn't there, she wouldn't want to face him again.

Silently, Dorcas watched Regulus's little magic show as he conjured a miniature version of the mansion in the air and pointed to the top floor.

"I suspect he's here. I've been watching this house a lot over the last few weeks. There's a small window here on the west side that sometimes has light coming out of it late at night, even when it's dark everywhere else."

Dorcas looked at said window and finally nodded hesitantly.

"Just so we understand each other here. I'm not going to do anything on this raid that puts my job at risk," she clarified matter-of-factly, placing her palms flat on the table.

"Yeah, okay...", Regulus said slowly and pressed his lips together. The silent request was written so clearly on his face that Dorcas rolled her eyes.

"I don't know what your business is with him, but he's a bloody Death Eater. So don't expect me to help save him from his just punishment."

"He only became a Death Eater because of me. Anything he may have done falls on me."

"That speaks neither for you nor for him."

"I just wanted it said. I know who Barty really is, better than anybody else. And he's not what you make him out to be."

Wow, heartwarming.

"Our deal is that I get him out of the house and that's what I'm going to do. Just that." Dorcas had no patience for this pity act. "As soon as the raid is over and the dust settles, I will return and then I expect Lupin to work his fucking ass off and hand me Crabbe on a silver

platter."

"Okay." Regulus looked down. Then, as if something ran through him, he set aside his complaisance, clenched his fists and looked her up from below, a dark determination in his bright eyes.

"... What do I have to do to make you let him escape?"

Dorcas laughed. At least he was finally speaking his mind. Even if it was in vain.

"Let me think..." She pretended to. "If you find a way to resurrect everybody you guys have murdered, maybe we can talk again."

Anger flashed over Regulus's face. "I gave up everything to kill Voldemort. I left everyone I cared about behind, risked my life multiple times. I never wanted to kill anyone. What more do you want?"

"Things you can't seem to give me."

"Not everyone is lucky enough to be born into a good, righteous family. I did what I had to do to survive. You're welcome to hate me for it, but stop blaming people like me or Barty for everything Voldemort has ever done."

Dorcas glared at Regulus.

"And I also told you I was ready to serve my sentence. I stand by it."

"Good, that's settled then." Dorcas said. "I don't understand the fuss then. Crouch Jr. is just getting his just deserts too. Just a little sooner than you."

"Without a proper trial to Azkaban for life is not a just punishment."

"We are at war, in case you haven't noticed. Justice is reciprocal."

"Then give Barty a chance to show he's fighting for what's right. He never had the chance. And we need everyone on our side we can get."

Dorcas didn't say anything, only swallowed her anger with a sip of tea. She wouldn't snap here, With Regulus's thick skull it would come to nothing anyway.

"But if you seem so insistent on your righteousness... go ahead," he said sullenly, glaring at Dorcas. "Take a good look at him when you

meet him. And then ask yourself if all this is really just. Whether he really deserves the punishment you have in mind for him."

"I will," Dorcas replied snidely and finally rose. She'd had enough of the drivel, hated herself for getting into this in the first place.

"And if you do actually decide to do the right thing then, I'm asking you to tell him this..."

Dorcas heard the words as she walked out, more involuntarily. She couldn't believe that Regulus really thought she would spare him. He was even stupider than she had thought.

The door behind her slammed shut the moment the idiot finished speaking.

***

The protective screen of the Crouch estate was so excessive that they had to apparate into the middle of the avenue at a distance of over 300 yards. It was ridiculous.

There were six of them, five Aurors of the old, annoying kind and Dorcas. Normally, the atmosphere at the beginning of missions was always buzzing with stupid comments and bets, but this time those present seemed to be aware of the seriousness of the situation. They were about to conduct a house search on one of the top brass in the ministry. One that would also be crowned with success. It would ruin Crouch Sr.

Dorcas had no sympathy for him. He wasn't a Death Eater, but it was common knowledge what kind of man he was. He didn't deserve mercy, and neither did his son. They were just another step towards Albert Crabbe.

They set in motion and passed through the protective screen, which no doubt immediately sent an alarm signal to the occupants of the house. So that in the time until their arrival at the house no one would get the idea of fleeing, they quickened their steps and shortly afterwards came to a halt with flowing cloaks in front of the massive entrance to the house. Two guards were waiting for them there, wands drawn and faces serious. They looked alarmed and blocked the Aurors'

way.

"Make way, gentlemen," said the leader of their unit, Gawain Robards, a still quite young but all the more arrogant Auror, pulling the judicial warrant out of his pocket and holding it unfolded in front of him. "We are Aurors. And we have a warrant."

"On what basis?" asked the one on the left, visibly unsettled.

Robards shook his head. "Where's Mr. Crouch Sr.? Tell him to get over here right away. He has one minute."

Without argument, one of the guards disappeared into the house and they waited a few tense seconds. In the meantime, Robards ordered two of them to position themselves around the house so that no one escaped their grasp. Dorcas was secretly glad that she had not been chosen for that.

Then the heavy front door opened again and she saw Bartemius Crouch Sr. step out, his devious rat face contorted with rage.

"What the hell is going on?" His gaze fell on Robards. "Gawain, explain this to me. What warrant?"

Robards floated the note to him. "Read it through in your own time. It's all in there."

Crouch did so, and with each line his eyes moved on, the anger, the outrage, grew further.

"Such impudence!" he roared, by which time he had surely not even half read the warrant. "How dare you make such insane accusations to your own superior?"

"You are on leave of absence Mr Crouch. Indefinitely," another Auror replied dryly. "And even if you weren't, the Auror Office acts independently of the rest of the department. We act without fear or favour. Not even of such significant wizards as yourself."

"These accusations are laughable! Completely far-fetched! Do you seriously think I would even exchange a word with my son? He's a Death Eater! I would kill him myself if I got my hands on him."

"Then you have nothing to fear, Mr Crouch," Robards said calmly. "Then we'll just get this story over with and forget it. The head of Auror Office will then be sure to send you a letter of apology."

"This is my house! I'm not having aurors snooping around here, there are important secret documents stored here!"

Robards sighed. "We're not going to touch those, so calm down. I'm afraid you have no choice in the matter."

And then he raised his hand, giving them the signal. They walked up to Crouch, pushed him aside and entered the house before he could say anything. Robards stayed behind, presumably taking care that Crouch didn't make any fuss and let them search in peace.

Dorcas knew exactly what she had to do. They divided the floors among them, Dorcas making an effort to get to the top floor where Regulus suspected Barty was. If she was already in this shit, she might as well take advantage of the situation and prove herself as well.

She shared the floor with another grumpy Auror, but he did not bother her any further and instead immediately began to question a small, frightened house elf.

Dorcas hurried down the hall, straight to the end, where a dark, musty library awaited her. Once inside, she looked around. It was all rather narrow, perhaps it only seemed that way because it was crammed to the ceiling with books. Dorcas discovered two small windows, but she was not really satisfied with them. She looked out thoughtfully. West side, he said. It didn't really fit. She drew her wand, levitated it in front of her and cast a silent spell to make it point north. She stood behind it, going through it step by step. Then, with an amused snort, she grabbed the wand again and put it away. The windows in the room faced south.

She turned to the west wall of the room, just as full of books as the other walls. Was this a game like the one in Diagon Alley? Did she just have to tap the right books and then a secret room would be revealed? If so, it could take weeks. She didn't have the time.

She stepped closer to the shelf. It looked unsuspicious, at most a little dusty. She scanned the spines of the books with her eyes, looking for irregularities in the wooden boards or missing dust. But there was nothing.

She was about to carefully tap the side panels when she heard footsteps behind her. Alarmed, she turned, expecting her colleague, but instead it was the house elf he had questioned. She stumbled into the room and then stopped abruptly when she caught sight of Dorcas.

Dorcas remained very still, half-turning to face her and trying to interpret her expression.

She was dressed in rags, as were all the house elves, but looked even more miserable than most of the others she had met. Her eyes were wide, kept jumping back and forth between her and the shelf.

Cautiously, Dorcas pointed.

"Is he behind it?"

She did not answer, but tears gathered in her eyes.

"Can you help me open it? Mr Crouch surely needs help, doesn't he?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again.

"I know your master must have forbidden you to do this in some way. But I won't tell anyone if you help me." She mused. "How about I just hide and you go check on him? You just didn't notice me. You didn't disobey an order."

The house elf looked like she was about to have a nervous breakdown.

"Surely he means a lot to you. Help me save him." That wasn't even a lie. Possibly even prison was better than being in the wing of Bartemius Crouch Sr.

"Young Mr. Crouch had to endure so much," the house elf sobbed out all at once, wiping her face on her rag.

"I know." Dorcas looked at her sympathetically. Her desperate, wide eyes actually stung.

"You're only going to lock him up again!"

Dorcas looked her firmly in the eye. "Maybe," she said honestly. "But no one will hurt him anymore. I promise."

She had always been good with house elves, even back at Hogwarts. It didn't take much though, you just had to treat them like sentient beings, instead of trampling them down.

After a few more heart-wrenching sobs, the elf finally nodded. Dorcas allowed herself a relieved sigh before hiding behind the armchair and initiating this silly show. It really seemed to help the house elf. She trudged over to the shelf, her eyes firmly fixed on the front, and began

pulling a sequence of five books about a third of the way off the shelf. Shortly afterwards the shelf began to change, indeed like the wall behind the Leaky Cauldron. And a few seconds later the passage was clear and Dorcas recognised a small, musty room behind it.

There he was. Sitting on a narrow, uncovered bed. His back was against the wall, his legs drawn up to his torso and his face, turned away from her, resting on his knees. Around his right ankle was a chain attached to the foot of the bed, giving him perhaps two metres of radius to walk. Around him, dirty, bloodstained cloths and notes lay scattered wildly on the floor, filling the otherwise extremely sparsely furnished room. It resembled a prison cell.

Dorcas wasted no time, pushed past the house elf, who was already retreating again anxiously, and hurried to the motionless figure on the bed. Although he must have heard the shelf open, he had not reacted.

"Barty Crouch?" she murmured and squatted beside the bed, touching him cautiously on the arm.

Now he was responding. He raised his head, turned his face to her. It was covered with bloody, poorly healing scratches and bruises. He seemed to be all skin and bone, his eyes full of burst veins, his lips chapped and bloody, his skin pale grey. He looked like a dead man walking.

"What?" he whispered languidly, his voice sounding rough and strained. He didn't seem to realise who was standing in front of him.

Dorcas eyed him silently for a moment. Took a deep breath and straightened up again.

"Dorcas Meadowes, Auror. I hereby arrest you temporarily," she said, and had to admit that it sounded like a bad joke. A harsh smell emanated from Barty as he stirred slightly, tilted his head and looked at her as if she had just spoken to him in a foreign language.

Take a good look at him.

Fuck, it was really bad. His own father had done that? Then he was even worse than she thought. And that was saying something.

"Do you understand what I just said?" she asked emphatically slowly, looking at him urgently.

Briefly she feared that his father had completely boiled his brain, but

then he closed his eyes for a moment and nodded.

"Good," she continued, and began to explain his rights to him while pulling the magic handcuffs out of her pocket. She toyed with the idea of letting her colleagues know that she had found him, but something inside her resisted. And it wasn't just her need to show off.

"Stand up," she urged Barty, and after a moment's hesitation, she added a quiet "if you can."

Barty slid across the dirty mattress to the edge of the bed, the chain links of his ankle rattling loudly, braced himself with difficulty and rose wobbly. As he did so, he looked as unsteady as a foal just after birth. More out of reflex than anything else, Dorcas grabbed him by the upper arm and held him upright that way. She could almost reach all the way around it with her hand. Barty began to shake wildly as the obvious iron deficiency and sagging blood pressure took hold and he almost fainted.

Justice?

She wordlessly turned Barty around and cuffed him. Once his hands were secured, she undid his ankle cuff with a well-aimed spell and slid out his bloody, reamed ankle.

With lips pressed together, she turned with him and began to urge him towards the door. Barty did not resist, his head hanging and powerless, he shuffled across the room, swaying as if he were drunk.

Halfway there, Dorcas recognised the house elf she had thought had long since made her escape. She clung to the bookshelf, peered through the doorway, straight at Dorcas and Crouch. Her eyes...

Dorcas stopped inevitably, Barty Crouch with her.

What more do you want?

Dorcas wondered who was talking in her head right now. Who was meant, what was going on inside her. Meanwhile, the house elf, the ever-ignored, forgotten house elf was looking at her with a steady gaze, prompting her.

But to do what? To be weak? To forget what she was here for? What she was fighting for? What she got up for every morning?

Decisions were not Dorcas's strong point. She liked to establish

unchangeable facts to which she could adapt. Fixed rules that left no room for hesitation and deliberation. Everything was easier that way.

Only it wasn't reality. Because nothing in life was simple. Because it expected choices. Big ones, difficult ones, sometimes all wrong. But they had to be made.

Dorcas closed her eyes for a moment. Then she stepped up close to Barty from behind until her lips were close to his ear.

"Which master do you serve?" she whispered. The question that would decide everything.

"The one who takes down my father," Barty replied just as softly, but the phrase echoed through Dorcas's core as if he had shouted it into a valley.

Before she could think about it further, she clasped his shoulder and squeezed it tightly to emphasise the importance of her next words.

"Listen to me very carefully now," she breathed, already regretting it. "I know who you are, and what things you did. That's why I have no interest in helping you."

Liar. You're so soft. So weak. That's exactly why Marlene isn't around anymore.

She shook the thoughts off convulsively. "But you seem to have people who want that. So do as I say if you want to see them again."

She expected some reaction from Barty, but not the one she ultimately got. A mocking laugh accompanied by a phlegmy cough.

"Who, exactly? I don't have anyone left... They're all dead, or have abandoned me."

Dorcas didn't know what he meant by that, but low voices from the hallway suggested to her at the same time that they didn't have time for such drivel.

"I have no idea what you're talking about... and I don't really care." She took her free hand and let it wander to the handcuffs that looked almost clunky around Barty's wrists. There was a little lever, she knew. If she moved it to the right....

It was only when the lever clicked that she realised she had inevitably

followed her thought. She had done it. The handcuffs were no longer locked. One strong pull and they would come off. She couldn't believe she had done it.

"Once we are out of the protection of the mansion, you can release the cuffs and disapparate," she said mechanically, hearing the voices approaching quickly. Her eyes found those of the house elf as she continued to speak. "Then apparate to the railway arches, Brick Road, you know where." That was exactly how the idiot had put it. "Regulus will be waiting for you there."

"What did you say...?" Suddenly life came back into Barty's battered body. He jerked his head back, staring at Dorcas with wide, bloodshot eyes. "Reg is...?"

She didn't let him finish, just shoved him forward roughly and hissed, "Play along now!"

And at the same moment the rest of the Aurors flooded the library. Dorcas took advantage of the momentum and yelled "I got him!"

For a moment there was a strange silence in the room, as if the Aurors themselves could not believe that they had just discovered a Death Eater in their superior's house.

"...Good work, Meadowes," one of them finally said, walking hesitantly towards them.

Dorcas nodded solemnly. "Secretly watched the house elf tamper with the shelf. Was then able to open it quickly."

A murmur of recognition. Barty's pitiful state caused a few raised eyebrows, but no one commented further. They accepted the prisoner from Dorcas and she just hoped that no one examined his cuffs more closely. Barty, who suddenly seemed to be a completely different person, put up an believable fight despite his exertions, spitting and spouting vulgar curses, so that the Auror was already more than busy enough with that.

"You fucking bastards!" shouted Barty as they led him out of the room. "Father, help me!"

Barty was probably planning to destroy as much more of his father's life as he could on the way out. It was an impulse Dorcas could relate to.

Crouch Sr. was deathly pale as they led his son past him out of the estate. Dorcas recognised Robards beside him, calmly talking him down, meanwhile conjuring up handcuffs as well. What she would have given to watch the spectacle in its entirety. But for the moment, she had to concentrate on her own little reckless game.

They left the estate, strode along the avenue like a royal delegation. The closer they got to the end of the protection spell and the more boisterous the mood between the Aurors became, the more tensity built up inside Dorcas. She cast sidelong glances at Barty at ever shorter intervals, who was still letting the mentally confused Death Eater hang out, but she could see the tension in his eyes too.

Five more steps. Dorcas took a shaky breath.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

They had barely gone through before Barty screamed wildly, tore open the cuffs, shoving away the Auror who was leading him. All the Aurors flinched, just like Dorcas, but probably for different reasons. It wasn't a second before half a dozen wands were pointed at Barty, but he just ducked and was gone with a loud crack, a millisecond before three red beams would have hit him.

All at once it was dead quiet between them. They lowered their wands, looked at each other with widened eyes, only slowly realising what had just happened.

Dorcas took a deep breath.

She regretted her action, but she knew that she would have regretted the opposite as well. A dilemma knew no winner.

And Dorcas's life was full of them.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Bis ans Ende der Welt / Till the End of the World' by Joris (Dorcas song :'( )

Hope you liked the chapter <3

See ya!

Chapter 49: All Together Now

Chapter Notes

Two chapters! <3 I feel like I'm slowly getting back into my uploading rhythm! (fingers crossed)
Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You saw my darkness and my pain

Saw my weakness and my shame

You saw night time turn to day

Let my troubles be washed away

Like those castles made of sand

That were never built to stand

Regulus knew the likelihood of Dorcas helping Barty was vanishingly small. She was so consumed by her senseless revenge that no amount of reasoning would get through to her.

And yet here he stood. At the appointed place, full of futile expectation and full of fear. He had not taken a Polyjuice Potion, not this time. That was risky, but Regulus would rather settle for one of those stupid shield caps, dark sunglasses and long, dark clothes than put on someone else's skin. How else would Barty ever believe him?

Remus was there too, somewhere a few hundred yards away. In case Barty really came here, they tried to cover as much distance as possible to catch him.

And as much as he wanted to see Barty again, he was also afraid of it. Afraid of what he would see. And afraid of the inevitable confrontation, the inevitable questions that would follow.

After a few agonising hours, when only Regulus's unwillingness to admit defeat kept them both here, it happened. A loud crack, just a few feet from Regulus. A figure landed on the sloppily mown grass, stumbled, collapsed, lay there for a few unreal seconds. Regulus held his breath, stared at him, speechless. Then rushed towards him, tried to help him up.

She had really done it. She had really let him escape. Regulus couldn't believe it.

He grasped Barty's arm and he reluctantly allowed himself to be helped up, but then shook Regulus off as if he were a thief trying to steal his wallet. He put some distance between them both and then turned at Regulus, his eyes wide and bloodshot. Showing Regulus what state he was in. It was even worse than he had imagined.

"Barty," he breathed, making sure that no one else could hear them. "I'm so glad you're okay. I was so worried."

"Who are you?" he croaked, his voice shrill. He probably thought he was dreaming, if he even suspected anything. Regulus lifted his cap a little and took off his sunglasses, erasing any lingering doubt.

But it did not have the effect he had hoped for.

Barty stumbled further backwards, shaking his head. "It can't be," he muttered, incredulous. "It's a trick... I thought Meadowes was just messing with me."

"It's not a trick," Regulus said carefully, coming closer very slowly. "I know it's hard to believe. But I'm still alive."

"No, no..." Barty continued, as if his life depended on it. "Reg would never have done this to me. Reg wouldn't have just left me behind."

Regulus felt his heart sink. He'd suspected it, had been afraid of phrases like that.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I had my reasons. I didn't want this to happen to you."

Slowly, the realisation seemed to reach Barty, as much as he resisted it. For a moment Regulus saw a thousand different emotions in his eyes. Shock, surprise, a glimmer of euphoria, joy, lo.... But then they were all gone. Washed away by something else. Something that stabbed Regulus right in the heart.

"What reasons?"

"I-I'll explain everything, but first let's get out of here. We don't want the Aurors to get on our trail..."

"No, tell me right now. Where have you been?" Regulus was startled by the sudden harshness in Barty's voice. It seemed like he was seeing right through Regulus.

"You're too loud..."

"*Where have you been?*", he shouted now. It shot through Regulus's body like bullets. "*Why did you do that? Why did you leave?"* Barty's face was flushed red, and Regulus saw tears glistening in his eyes.

"I'm sorry!" he replied desperately. He frantically searched for the right words in his head, a good, quick explanation that would wipe the pain from Barty's face. But in his head was nothing but panicked emptiness. Maybe it was his mind's way of telling him, that he really didn't have an acceptable excuse.

Anxiously he held out his hand to him. "... Please come with me. I promise, I'll tell you everything." *Even though that still might not be enough.*

At that Barty fell silent, breathing heavily, his whole body shaking. Regulus was briefly afraid that he would just vanish, somewhere Regulus couldn't find him. But he stayed.

"Please, Barty," Regulus repeated, turning around fearfully as he heard footsteps approaching from behind. Remus.

"Why are you making all that noise?" he said, out of breath. "Heard you all the way to the main road."

He turned to Barty, who was staring at him no less angrily.

"You were in on it together?" Barty's voice sounded strained now.

Remus nodded, seemingly picking up the tense mood quickly. "It's all gone badly, I know. We've got some things to sort out. Come along and it will all make more or less sense."

Will it though?

Barty still didn't seem convinced, it was breaking Regulus's heart more and more. Of course, he had expected something like this, but, naïve

as he was, he had still hoped that Barty was at least happy to see him again. Regulus had missed him so much.

"Where to?" he asked, more quietly.

Remus took over answering. "To a secret place that I'm not just going to blurt out now." He sounded annoyed. "Come on. I know you've had a disastrous few weeks and you just want to rest. But we put your father, that piece of shit, behind bars. Don't you think we deserve five minutes of your attention for that? Even if you're still pissed at Regulus afterwards?"

That, of all things, seemed to convince Barty. Regulus's guts knotted painfully.

As before, he had his hand outstretched, which Barty now eyed cautiously.

"Fine by me," he said then, finally coming closer. He stared at Regulus, his eyes red, his gaze hurt and cold. His hand, gripping Regulus's, was even colder. It sent a shiver down his spine.

He felt numb. Wanted to say so much, but nothing came out.

"Take me to your fucking hideout already."

And Regulus did.

***

They did not take Barty into their hut, at least not yet. Because although Barty didn't have a wand pointed at them and seemed all in all more composed than Dorcas, he was still a Death Eater. And Regulus didn't know how loyal he still was to Voldemort.

They took him to an abandoned wanderer's lodge, not so dissimilar to their own. Only they hadn't worked on it magically, so you could still see the half-rotted wood and ivy when you entered the small room.

Barty looked irritated, but he didn't say anything. Just followed them inside, stood a few paces away from them and scowled at them. At Regulus, mostly. It was almost as if his eyes were glued to him. And not in the good way.

"I'm listening," he said, and any anger had fizzled into nothing. All that was left was distance. Perhaps that was even worse.

Regulus was grateful to Remus for doing the talking this time. They had agreed to remain as vague as possible until they knew Barty's disposition and intent. What Remus did tell was that they were working together to take down Voldemort. And that Regulus had almost died once in the process and then gone into hiding to increase their chances of success. Summed up like that, Regulus really did sound like the biggest asshole. All the thoughts he had had, worrying about his and Barty's safety, suddenly seemed beside the point, almost absurd. Maybe he really should have told him.

Barty didn't let on how he felt about them trying to kill Voldemort. Regulus didn't know if that was a good sign. He didn't know anything anymore.

"Well, I really expected a lot," Barty said finally, in a calm voice. "But definitely not this."

Regulus gave Remus a sideways glance. He looked just as uncertain as Regulus felt.

"What do you mean?" asked Remus.

Barty's eyes left Regulus and looked to Remus. A derisive snort escaped him.

"That you two would work together to overthrow the Dark Lord... I mean, no offence to you, Lupin, but as deep as you've always crawled up Voldemort's ass.... It doesn't quite add up."

"A lot has changed. Me most of all. In large part because of Regulus." Barty's gaze returned, tentative. Wandered back and forth between Remus and Regulus.

"I see."

"I gave him potions," Regulus interjected hastily. "Memory potions that shook him up. He's not the bastard he was in the beginning."

"Well then, congratulations," was all Barty said, directed at Remus. There was something mocking about it.

"The fact that we want to overthrow Voldemort doesn't really seem to affect you," Remus replied, in the same tone.

Barty shrugged. "Any remaining loyalty to him was lost when he decided to let me rot in my father's house."

That made Regulus inwardly breathe a sigh of relief, at least a little.

"Sounds reasonable," Remus said. "And then maybe you can understand why we're going through all this secrecy."

"Not really." He glared at Regulus. "A letter would have done, by the way."

"What?", Regulus couldn't follow.

"A letter would have done. Two lines. 'Hey Barty, don't worry I'm fine. I just need to go into hiding for now.' What would that have cost you?"

Regulus began chewing on the inside of his cheek. "Maybe two minutes."

"Maximum." The word dripped with bitterness.

"I'm sorry," Regulus repeated again, barely able to hold his gaze. What had he been thinking?

"You mentioned that before."

It was embarrassing and probably out of place, but Regulus thought he was about to explode, so he verbalized all his childish doubts.

"I didn't think it would hit you like this, I really didn't. I thought it would be easier for you if you just moved on from me. Because I'm still sure this mission is going to kill me sooner or later. And I wanted to spare you all that."

"What did you want to spare me? The thought that there's someone who needs me? That I need? That there is anyone who cares what happens to me?" He tiredly shook his head.

"Stop it," Regulus said pleadingly. "I was only trying to protect you. I did it *because* I care about you so much."

"Why do you think we got you out of that bloody mansion?" added Remus. "Hell, we have better things to do right now. Neither I nor especially Dorcas would have risked it. That was just Regulus."

Barty was silent. What Regulus would give to be able to see inside his

head right now.

"And what do you want from me now in return?" he finally asked.

"Nothing at all!" exclaimed Regulus, horrified. Even though he had told Dorcas otherwise. But at that moment that seemed so far away, so irrelevant. He would not force someone to fight who had been through so much. No matter the consequences.

Remus shook his head as well. "You don't owe us anything. You can leave if you want to. Although I wouldn't recommend it in your current state."

He could barely stand up straight. When was the last time he had eaten?

"I'll be fine," Barty muttered.

"I don't know if this is a good idea..." Regulus fell silent as Remus raised his hand suggestively. He was right, he should do the talking here.

"What about this: You come with us, for a few days, until you're feeling a bit better and won't collapse after a few steps. Then you can leave if you want."

"Or you can stay," Regulus added, his head down. It sounded pathetic, but he wanted it said anyway.

Somewhat hesitantly, Remus agreed with him. "You can stay too, yes. But it's entirely up to you."

Barty didn't look happy.

"Do you even have the capacity for that?"

Remus shrugged. "It's not like we can't make it." He raised an eyebrow and pulled his wand out of his jacket a little to punctuate his words. "I can give you a retreat, then you can be to yourself. We have plenty of medicine and potions too. You'll be fitter in a few days. And then we'll see."

Regulus wanted to add so much more, but he pulled himself together. The more he insisted, the less Barty would probably want it. Sad as it was.

Barty thought about it for a long time, many different emotions in his

eyes, none of which Regulus could name. Finally, shoulders drooping, the dark shadows under his eyes more prominent than ever, he murmured. "Alright. But also only because I don't know where else to go."

"That's good enough for us," Remus retorted before Regulus could say anything embarrassing. "Then follow me."

***

Regulus had sworn off potions to calm him down. He had realised that they did much more harm than good. Instead, he had begun to lull his mind with work. A busy mind worked. Didn't ask questions. Regulus craved it constantly, that small hum, that busy clarity.

In the last days he had worked harder than ever.

Remus had created Barty his own room, directly adjoining the study. Had not skimped on comfort, as if to make up for the past few weeks. Regulus had brought Barty potions and tended to his wounds carefully, not even once lifting his eyes. It had been terrible. And ever since, he wondered in every spare second if he had now managed to erase everything that had connected him to Barty. After so many years.

Instead of answering that question for himself, he kept working.

It was a kind of trance, actually. When he hung over those ancient books, he would lose himself for a moment, in the good way. Most of the time, early in the morning, it would even turn into a peaceful, dreamless sleep, from which he would wake up sometime around mid-morning, with a stiff neck and marks on his face.

That night he realised in time that he was about to doze off and saved himself from the neck lock. He looked around, looked out the single, small window and noticed that it was raining. Briefly he felt the need to stick his head out and let it rain all over him. It would certainly help with the headache.

He decided against it and instead stumbled towards the living room and picked up the bowl of food Remus had prepared for him, as he did almost every evening. Regulus desperately needed to get up and give

Remus something in return. But he probably wasn't in any condition to live like a normal person and care for himself again until the Horcrux hunt was over.

He went into the living room, which was empty, as expected. He remembered that Remus had an assignment from Voldemort that night, and Barty wouldn't be coming out of his room anyway. So he had his peace.

He sat down on the couch and rested his head on the backrest for a moment, staring at the ceiling. The last Horcrux hid itself far too well. All the other Horcruxes, apart from their specific reference to Voldemort's life, had left a trace, had been hidden with his closest confidants or places of his childhood. But not this one. Was he overlooking something fundamental?

Frustrated, he finished eating, put the bowl down and stretched out on the couch, continuing to gaze at the ceiling as if it knew the answer. At this hour, either the very best thoughts came to him or only rubbish. Regulus soon realised that this night belonged to the latter category. Finally, he closed his eyes in resignation.

When he opened them again, it was morning. It felt like he had only dozed for ten minutes, at least his body still felt like it. He rubbed his eyes and it felt so good that he couldn't stop. It was only when he heard a noise - a loud clatter of dishes - that he jerked his hands down and looked around.

In the kitchen, which was not much more than a brown row including the fridge, stood Barty. He had his back turned to him and seemed to be washing up. Regulus glanced at the coffee table and saw that his bowl was gone. Confused, he sat up and only then noticed that someone had covered him with a thin woollen blanket.

"Good morning," Regulus said cautiously, somewhat perplexed. This was the first time he had seen Barty outside his room after his arrival.

"Morning," Barty replied quietly, without turning around.

Gingerly, Regulus grasped the blanket, feeling a pleasant sensation inside him as he realised what it implied.

"Thank you," he said. "You didn't have to."

"Hmm." Barty set the rinsed bowl aside to drain. It said a lot that he was washing by hand.

"How are you?" He didn't really know why he dared to ask these questions. Perhaps it was the sleep still in his bones. Or maybe it was the warmth of the blanket.

"Better," was all Barty said, setting down the nearest bowl. Regulus could tell, even from behind him. He stood up straighter, his hair was washed, his clothes clean. Yet he was still very thin.

"I'm glad to hear that," Regulus said. "Do you need any more potions or anything?"

"No. Hardly feel any pain anymore."

"Very good..." Regulus fell silent. He certainly didn't want the conversation to stop, not when he had Barty this far. But it was as if he had forgotten how to make any kind of small talk.

He waited until Barty had finished washing up, turned around and Regulus saw his pale, haggard face. He seemed to want to say something, had visibly taken a deep breath and opened his mouth slightly. Regulus waited, fearful, expecting the worst.

"Listen," Barty began, his voice a little shaky. "I'm still fucking angry, but I don't want to seem ungrateful either. You guys saved my life. I wanted to say thank you for that."

Would it have even come to his imprisonment if Regulus hadn't left him behind?

"I don't know if I'm staying here yet. I still need time to think about it."

"Take as much as you need. You're always welcome here."

Barty's fists clenched. "Please stop all this ass kissing, Reg, it's not like you."

Regulus's first impulse was to apologise, but this time he remembered better. Instead, he lowered his gaze.

"I thought about what you said too," Barty continued. "That you thought the story about you dying was the best thing for me and that I'd be over it in a few weeks anyway... The thing is, I actually believe you. But it also drives me crazy, you don't even know how much."

"Why?"

"That's your thing. You've always thought that no one cares about you. That your sacrifice, your disappearance would be the greatest service to humanity and that everyone would be better off without you. That's why you push everyone away and hurt them, over and over again. And I don't know what else I can do to prove you wrong. I don't have the strength for it anymore."

"I..."

"You don't have to answer. I just wanted to tell you that I do believe you had no bad intentions. It still doesn't change much." *You still hurt me.*

Sadness dripped from his voice, so strong that Regulus wanted to cover his ears.

"You should go back to sleep now, Reg. You look like you still need it."

Regulus wanted to do a thousand things now, but definitely not sleep.

"See you then," Barty said simply and turned to leave. Before disappearing into his room, though, he said, "I'm really glad you're not dead. Don't you dare make up any other bullshit in your head."

***

When Remus arrived at the hut a couple of hours later, Regulus was still in the same place, doing little more than staring into space and possibly doing exactly what Barty had told him not to do.

"Were you asleep just now?" asked Remus, glancing at the clock and pointing at the woollen blanket still wrapped around the lower half of his body.

"I wish," Regulus said, finally pushing the blanket aside. He also glanced at the clock. "You're late today."

Remus nodded and plopped down on the couch beside him with a loud sigh. "Got my talk with Dorcas over with."

"Oh, and how was it? What's the mood like at the Auror Office?"

Remus snorted. "Rock bottom, I'd say. Dorcas got off lightly because she's still in training. They rather chided the others as to why no one checked the restraints. All in all, the operation is still considered a success because Crouch Sr. was caught red-handed. Very curious to see how they will convict him."

"I hope they send him to Azkaban."

"He deserves it. From what Dorcas said, he must have really kept Barty like a prisoner. Chained to the bed and all."

Regulus felt sick just thinking about it. "That Crouch Sr. was even allowed to run free for so long in the first place..."

"Better late than never. Everyone gets what's coming to them eventually."

Regulus looked at Remus thoughtfully. "Yeah." Should he tell Remus about his conversation with Barty? By now they were telling each other just about everything. But what he had said about Regulus ...

"And one more thing" interrupted Remus his thoughts, speaking more quietly, more muffled now. "I asked Dorcas about Sirius too."

"Oh, and? Did she tell you anything?"

"Yes..."

"And? How is he?"

Remus bit his lip, looking at him from the side, and Regulus suddenly saw fear in his eyes.

"I don't know, and it scares the shit out of me."

"Why is that? Hasn't she seen him?"

"No. But no one has. She said Sirius disappeared without a trace. For almost a year now."

Regulus leaned forward, his eyebrows drawn together. "What? And nobody knows where he is?"

Remus shook his head, hands clenched in his lap. "She told me a bit more when she realised how much it was upsetting me. She said Sirius came to her just after the whole thing with me blew up. He must have

been completely out of it. And he was out for revenge, trying to kill me."

"Are you sure?" asked Regulus, gently placing a hand on his shoulder as he noticed how agitated Remus was becoming. "Did he really say it like that?"

Remus nodded, distressed. "It was all he lived for, supposedly. Dorcas helped him, together they even managed to capture Bellatrix and interrogate her about me."

"What, *Bella*? How did they do that?"

"I don't know. But she told Sirius what really happened to me, with the torture... That apparently messed him up so badly that he gave up looking for me altogether. And shortly after that, he disappeared."

Regulus had to process the words first. "It's probably not bad that he knows at least part of the truth now. But the fact that he disappeared afterwards doesn't sound good at all."

"I'm really worried, Reg," Remus whispered chokingly. "What if something happened to him?"

Regulus rubbed his shoulder awkwardly. "Don't always assume the worst. Maybe he just needed some time off after all this? I know him, he used to run away all the time when he had fights with our parents. He likes to retreat sometimes."

"But for that long?" Remus looked at him incredulously. "And not even Lily and James know where he is? That's not like him at all."

Regulus had to secretly agree with him on that. But of course he didn't show it. "After all, it was an exceptional situation for him. It certainly took a lot out of him. Maybe he just drew a line for the time being."

"I should have talked to him. I should have explained it to him and told him that I love him. He thinks I'm Voldemort's puppet now. And I'm sure he thinks it's somehow his fault."

"That wouldn't have done any good. He wouldn't have believed you." *And he won't now.*

"We don't know that."

Yes, we do.

He didn't like to brag about it, but Regulus knew his brother like no other. And betrayal was the worst thing anyone could do to him. He would never forgive that, never. Not even under these circumstances.

"I don't know what I'll do if anything happened to him."

"Nothing happened to him." Regulus got over himself and hugged Remus, who returned the gesture gratefully, clinging to him almost as much as he had the night of the disaster in Godric's Hollow.

"You'll see him again," he added softly and Remus nodded gratefully into his shoulder. Regulus could feel how tense he was. Briefly, he wondered when they would finally be able to live a normal life again. If that was even still within the realm of possibility.

After that, they tried to pull themselves out of the dark mood and changed topics. Remus told them that he had given Dorcas the first information about Crabbe and also that everything was set for his meeting with Rabastan.

But all in all it was a wasted effort. It was obvious they were both occupied with something else. Regulus constantly thinking about what Barty had told him and Remus so worried about Sirius that his shoulders tensed and his leg was getting restless again.

There really was no escape from it all.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'All Together Now' by Mandrax Queen

Chapter 50: The Needed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You know it: Those who are needed are not free.

It was like a prison. This small three-room flat, shielded from all danger, inaccessible to dark magic and even darker witches and wizards. Although it tried to cover up its true nature with its flowery wallpaper, the playful, high-quality wooden furniture and the colourful toys scattered on the carpet in the living room, James knew better. To him, all that was just mockery. Every day anew it laughed at him, held under his nose that this was the only thing he would ever see again. An eternal cycle. Madness.

It's for Harry, was the thought that had kept James going for a year. *For Harry.*

He still clung onto that, desperately. His last strand of sense.

Sometimes life had a high price. Sometimes it came at the cost of freedom.

***

It was one of those eternally monotonous, unbearable afternoons. Harry was asleep on the couch, limbs stretched far from him, a sock, victim of the battle against fatigue, had slipped off his foot and was half stuck in the crack of the couch. James sat on the floor in front of it, his back against the seating, staring at the colourful wallpaper. It was his way of enjoying the silence. Going on autopilot for a moment, thinking nothing. He loved Harry more than anything. But sometimes he also robbed him of every last bit of energy he had left.

The phone rang. James's body vehemently resisted getting up and he was infinitely grateful when he heard Lily come out of the kitchen and take the call. She spoke softly, James could only hear bits and pieces.

But the way Lily's shoulders slumped already told him it wasn't a nice conversation. What else would it be.

This Muggle phone was her last remaining link to the outside world. For the first few months, James had been convinced that it was the only thing keeping them both from going insane. By now, looking at Lily's hunched, exhausted form and her clenched fist, he believed rather the opposite.

When Lily finally hung up, she turned and looked at James with a haggard sadness in her eyes. James had learned to suppress the panic that overcame him at the sight. Everyday reality.

"Who?" he asked quietly, reaching out to Lily as she sauntered towards him, just as grey and exhausted as he felt.

Who died this time?

"Caradoc," she only whispered and James nodded as if she had just informed him that he would have to take the shift tomorrow.

He rose from the floor with difficulty, but only enough to sit on the couch, pulling Lily next to him as he did so, putting an arm around her shoulders and kissing her on the cheek.

"Has the funeral been yet?" he murmured softly.

"Tomorrow... I wish I could be there..."

James hadn't known Caradoc very well, but Lily had taken a number of shifts with him in the past. It was unfair that she couldn't say goodbye to him.

"I know, love. I'm sorry." What else could he say? They were locked in here, after all. Until Voldemort was no longer a threat to Harry's life. And hopes of ever reaching that state were fading more and more with each call.

They sat in silence for a while, enjoying not having to entertain Harry, who was logically bored to death, within the same four walls all day. James gently stroked Lily's back.

"Who was on the phone? Moody?" he asked at one point, trying to keep himself awake.

Lily nodded, thoughtfully. As if she already knew what question

would follow next now.

"Did he say anything about Siri...?"

"No," she interrupted him. "No, he hasn't heard anything."

"Okay." That word came out small, light. Yet it was anything but.

They knew of his doings with Dorcas. Had heard from her about his brief but intense vendetta, even if she hadn't told any details. But that had been the last sign of life. Since then he had disappeared without a trace. James knew how he had been mentally. And to say he was terrified for him was a huge understatement.

And yet here he was. In the little three-room flat, staring at floral wallpaper day after day. Unable to do anything but sink into self-pity.

But then Harry woke up again, demanding every fibre of their attention. Good timing.

***

The next time the phone rang, Lily wasn't around to save him. She was in the bathroom, bathing Harry, leaving James no choice but to listen to the daily calamity.

There was still the small hope that it was Peter or Mary after all, just wanting to chat, asking how they were. But these calls became rarer and rarer. There was nothing left to say to each other, at least nothing happy, optimistic. They were all trapped, in their own way. Everything was falling apart, step by step.

James stomped towards the phone, which rang relentlessly, grasped the receiver and yanked it up, pressing it firmly to his ear.

"Hello?" he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. He expected Moody's or Doges busy voice, which would immediately rattle off some bad news. But, strangely, it didn't happen. He heard nothing at all.

"Hello?" repeated James, frowning. "Is anyone there?"

Again, nothing, except the faint static of the line. Something about it

worried James. But not because he was afraid of having a Death Eater on the line. It was someone else entirely.

He heard a slight breath, like a sigh. And James's premonition became overwhelming.

"Sirius?" whispered James, choking. "Sirius, is that you?"

Silence. But a different one than before. Full of tension. James couldn't tell if it was just coming from him.

"Sirius, if it's you, please say something. Please." James sounded pleading, desperate. He couldn't mask it. Everything in him cried out for release, for some sign of life from his best friend, for some relief from his guilty conscience.

But he wasn't granted that.

Another breath, a crack and then his counterpart had hung up. James held the receiver to his ear for what must have been another half a minute, listening to the annoying, continuous tone and trying to get his heartbeat back under control.

Finally, he managed to hang up, leaning exhaustedly against the wall next to it and running his hands through his hair. The longer he thought about it, the more he convinced himself that Sirius had called him, a Sirius who was alive, who was well, who James didn't have on his conscience.

It was a dangerous mental spiral. One that James knew even now would deprive him of his sleep. But he still couldn't help it.

He just wanted to know whether Sirius was all right.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from ‚Love Poems', a collection of poems by Bertolt Brecht

Trying to upload the next chapter(s) this weekend! <3 You can probably guess the PoV ;P

I wish you all a nice day/week!

See ya.

Chapter 51: Numb Me

Chapter Notes

CW Alcohol Abuse, Psychological Addiction, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Depression, Anxiety, Mild Panic Attack

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I don't give a shit what tomorrow is

What do you know about life if you never died, huh?[...]

Next round, please, I'm not getting any younger

Hard school of life and learnt from the best

Same planet, but worlds apart, yes

Grief had many forms. Sometimes it was violent, sometimes it was quiet, sometimes it just couldn't be put into words. And everyone had their own way of dealing with it, fought their own battles, eventually won or lost, or just never stopped.

Sirius knew that wounds like his could not heal if they were constantly scratched or reopened. So his way of dealing with it had been to disappear from London, from hell. He had left everyone behind, even the people he still cared about. All in an effort to get up again, to start all over again, somehow. Had hoped that if he just took his time, just got through every day separately, that someday it would become easier.

By now he had realized it wouldn't. There was no escape, not from this.

Not even time was merciful to him.

***

Calling James had been his biggest mistake in months. Sirius couldn't even say why he did it, what had gotten into him. But he had violated his most important rule and broken the forbidden seal on his past. The seal that was the pillar of everything. That one thing that had kept him from falling apart.

Even though he had quickly woken up from his trance and hung up, it had already been too late. James's hopeful, desperate voice alone had taken him one step too far back in time. Had let him look back into the abyss he had desperately pulled himself out of. A place he could never return to. Never. Under no circumstance.

And now his mind was spinning again, in the most dangerous way. In a way that Sirius only knew one solution for.

Don't hesitate, came the comforting voice, whenever Sirius needed it. *You know what to do.*

Sirius knew.

For forgetting and being forgotten, Broad Street was responsible in Birmingham. It had become Sirius's second home since he had been stranded in this city, and since he had realized he had no other way to cope with everything that had happened. The best part about it was that he remained completely anonymous, didn't have to get to know anyone closely, didn't have to commit to anything or anyone. There was only him, the alcohol and anything else he could get his hands on.

Hopefully that would be enough today.

The inside of the club was stuffy and dark. It smelled of sweat, of smoke, of booze, all signs that it was going to be a good night. The music was loud, going right through Sirius's whole body. Effortlessly, he picked up the rhythm and mingled with the crowd, who welcomed him like he belonged.

He didn't stay there long, his first way led him to the bar as usual, where he first made himself presentable. He quickly emptied two glasses of whiskeys and after a short while felt a pleasant relaxation settle over him. It was as if he was waking up, as if the version that met even days like these with a smile, that didn't collapse under them,

was emerging. By now, it was the only way to function. And that was fine. At least there was still a way to function at all.

After another whiskey, he pushed his way onto the dance floor again, among ecstatic, dark-clad Muggles from whom he was by now almost indistinguishable. He had certainly adapted over the last year, had observed the people he now belonged to, had silently studied them, imitated them. By now he was really good at it.

He danced for a while, alternating between alone and with others around him. That was the beauty of drunks, no inhibitions, no prejudices, no empty promises. They were close for a moment, lost in the music. And when the song was over, they were strangers again. Just as it should be.

Sirius spent the first few hours like this, until he was sweating, panting and feeling woozy. Still the restlessness wouldn't leave him completely.

What a few seconds of silence on the phone with James could do to him.

He stumbled out the side entrance, down a three-step staircase where a bunch of other people were enjoying the cool air and giving their ears a break.

Sirius took a few steps, took his lighter from his pocket and lit his cigarette. His body tensed at the sudden muffled silence and the clarity that inevitably came with it. He ignored it, inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs, looking around discreetly. He knew that this was the place. He had heard others talk about getting their pills out here.

He scanned the people around, some making out, others talking, smoking, minding their own business. Between them, a few yards from Sirius, there was a man, casually leaning against the wall beside the side entrance like he belonged there. He wore a big black jacket, had one hand in his pocket, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, the tip of which glowed slightly in the semi-darkness.

Sirius had a feeling that was the person he was looking for. After finishing his cigarette, he casually searched in his pocket for money, and, once found, closed his hand around it. After that he approached, making eye contact with the man. He was about his height, broad shoulders, dark hair and a somewhat knowing expression on his face. He waited until Sirius was right in front of him, and had wordlessly given him a glimpse of the note.

"Damn", he then smirked and took a drag on his cigarette, pinching it between his thumb and index finger. "Is that the impression I'm making?"

Sirius bit his lip hard. "Fuck." He didn't feel embarrassed about confusing this guy with a dealer. But his mind was getting more and more relentless and he knew he needed to find something *fast*.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Sorry for disturbing..." Sirius was already looking around, searching for somebody who was actually selling.

"I hate to ruin your evening, but i don't think you'll find anything here tonight. The cops cleaned this place out just last week."

Shit. Fucking shit.

This was terrible. He needed something, he *needed*...

"Anything I can help you with?" The guy asked. "You look a bit lost."

Sirius reluctantly turned back to the stranger. He looked at him curiously, his pupils slightly dilated from the alcohol. Or maybe from something else.

"...I don't think so", Sirius replied, not quite able to break eye contact. He didn't know what exactly it was, but something about the it seemed to calm him down for a moment.

"What a shame," the guy sighed, smirking, slightly leaning towards Sirius.

"What's your name?", he asked, though he didn't know why.

"Leo. And yours?"

"Sirius."

His smile widened. "Very nice. And what's your real name?"

Sirius wasn't in the mood for this discussion. "It doesn't matter, does it?"

"True." He tentatively blew cigarette smoke into the air. Sirius still couldn't look away.

"This is the first time I've seen you here," Sirius said eventually.

"It is my first time here."

"Wow. And what brings you to this sad dump?"

"Oh, the usual. Just the desire to forget about all the things that went wrong. The never-ending song."

Sirius tilted his head, returning the smile for the first time. Perhaps two fake smiles together made a real one.

"And you?" continued Leo, inviting Sirius to come closer with his gaze. "What would you like to forget?"

Myself, was probably the closest to the truth. *Everything I am, everything I stand for, every goddamn tragedy.*

Cool wind blew past Sirius, setting the hair on his forearms. But he didn't really feel the cold. Rather, he was thinking of the unexpected opportunity that was just opening up in front of him. Maybe this was a different, even more promising kind of trip. Maybe then he wouldn't have to keep wandering around, frantically searching for pills that would make him feel good again.

Maybe he *was* ready for it again. His counterpart seemed the perfect test subject, visually far away from any danger zone. And he obviously wanted Sirius, just the way Sirius needed it right now.

"Myself," he repeated aloud, taking a deep, shaky breath, before putting his hands on Leo's shoulders and closing the distance. Leo welcomed him, placing his hands on his back, carefully, watching Sirius intensely as he moved closer, leaning forward and whispering softly in his ear:

"Do you want to help me with that?"

And Leo's grip tightened.

***

It was different. Kissing and touching someone you didn't know, didn't know every preference of, was a new experience. But it was just right

that way. Completely new territory, no familiarity, and no feelings attached.

He pulled Leo into his flat and had barely closed the door before he pressed against him and kissed him roughly. Leo pressed back, quickly slipped his hands under his shirt, deepening the kiss. Sirius focused on the feeling of it all, the soft humming in his ears, the long awaited silence in his head. It was *perfection*.

That's why he didn't understand why his traitorous fingers still wouldn't stop trembling.

Before Leo could notice anything, Sirius broke away from him and pulled him down the hallway into the bedroom. It didn't have much more to offer than a narrow bed, on which Sirius pushed Leo onto and kissed him again, greedily, hurriedly, as if his life depended on it. Perhaps it did.

A first deep sigh escaped Leo between kisses. Sirius ran his hand through his short hair, kissing his neck, pressing their hips together. He continued until he felt Leo's fingers around his waist, turning them both so that Sirius was on his back and Leo on top of him. Looking at him hungrily, Leo brushed his fingers lightly over Sirius's tattooed skin and moved up to the crook of his neck, brushing his hair strands aside and starting to caress it with his lips. Sirius tilted his head to the side and tried to control his faltering breath. This, this was exactly what he....

"Fuck, you're way too beautiful," Leo gasped between kisses, burying a hand in Sirius's hair.

Beautiful.

Sirius's body reacted before he could control it. He winced as if Leo had slapped him across the face. Pushed him aside unsteadily, shot his upper body upwards and released his legs. Everything inside him was screaming, incoherently. Images forced themselves on him, constricting his throat so violently that he gasped for air. For a moment, hot water seemed to run down his back and the smell of shampoo and *him* was in his nose. Of the *parasite*, the monster, the one who had destroyed him. The one who had destroyed everything.

Panicking, he pushed himself to the edge of the bed, sat up and breathed deeply and calmly, deeply and calmly, deeply and....

"Hey," he heard Leo's raspy voice, hesitantly. "...Is everything okay?

Did I do something wrong?"

Sirius kept his head lowered, completely fixated on breathing. He had his arms propped up on the edge of the bed, pressing them firmly down onto the wood so that they would finally stop shaking.

Behind him, Leo shifted on the bed and to make matters worse, Sirius felt a cautious hand touching his shoulder. He swatted it away roughly, a mechanism, forcing his lips apart, hissing "Don't touch me!" like a shot animal. Leo flinched back.

After a brief moment of silence, Leo slid off the bed, straightened his clothes and squatted, this time a fair distance away from him. Sirius found it harder and harder to stay in the here and now and keep his breath steady. He would give anything to be alone now. No one should see him like this.

So beautiful.

There was simply no escaping him.

Sirius was still a prisoner.

He would never be anything else.

"What's wrong?" asked Leo quietly. "Do you need something?"

Sirius did not answer. Instead, following an impulse, he rose, stumbled to the window sill where the *reality bringer* was waiting for him. Hastily he opened the bottle of firewhiskey and poured himself a generous glass, raised it to his greedy lips and emptied it within seconds. Maybe that would stop the approaching panic attack.

For a moment, it was just him and the bitter taste of the liquor on his tongue. Only after a while of complete trance and silence, did he remember that Leo was still there, watching him silently.

"I think it's better if you leave now," Sirius said, struggling to keep his voice calm. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"You haven't," Leo said, standing up.

"Please leave," Sirius repeated, insistently. Leo just continued to look at him, sympathetically.

"I will, no problem... But it wouldn't bother me to keep you company for a bit either, if you need someone to talk to..."

Sirius looked at Leo uncomprehendingly. Did he seem like he was in the mood for small talk? With a complete stranger at that, who was only here because Sirius had thought a quick fuck would solve his problems?

"Don't get me wrong... I just don't think you should be alone right now." Leo didn't have much left of his mysterious, alluring presence back at the club. He looked genuinely worried, badly enough.

"I'm always alone. I can handle it."

The pity in his eyes was unbearable.

"But you don't have to." Leo sighed. "Look, it's just an offer. If you don't want to, I'll leave right away."

Sirius didn't answer, there was not much more in his head than forbidden memories and the overwhelming urge to escape that pitying gaze. He stormed past Leo, out of the bedroom, through the living room and towards the glazed balcony door. He opened it hastily and stepped into his little freedom, which was exactly twenty square feet in size, had a single small folding chair to offer and was everything Sirius could wish for at the moment. Drawing the cool air deep into his lungs, he sat down, staring into the darkness. The ominous tightness in his chest slowly disappeared again. And for a moment it was wonderfully quiet.

Leo broke the silence as he slowly followed him into his sacred realm, leaning against the banister as far away from Sirius as possible and gazing up at the night sky. Sirius didn't know why he was so eager to keep him company when he was clearly a fucked-up wreck.

"I'm sure you imagined the evening a little differently," Sirius muttered at one point, glancing at Leo, who was trying hard to look nonchalant but failed completely.

Leo just shrugged and threw him a fleeting smile. "I had a really shitty day, so I didn't expect anything at all. Just meeting you has already made it much better."

Sirius felt his inner automated resistance. Part of him screamed that surely the guy was just trying to charm him and taking advantage of his weakness. That no one was being kind to him without ulterior motives. No one.

But Sirius had also learned in the last year that there were plenty of

Muggles who were actually just as miserable as he was. And unlike the witches and wizards of his old life, they weren't all rotten.

"Listen," Sirius whispered at one point. "You seem really alright, but I'm going to be honest with you. This," He gestured awkwardly between them, "... wasn't a good idea. I thought it might work, but I was wrong. This has nothing to do with you, though."

"That's okay..."Leo hesitated, "but maybe we could still, like, try to get to know each other? In a platonic way, you know?"

"I don't think you want to know someone like me."

"You're wrong about that."

Sirius looked up at the sky, where the moon was just struggling out from between the clouds, giving off soft, steady light. He hated the sight.

"I, uh" Leo continued, his voice sounding pressed all at once, "I'm sorry if I... *triggered* anything. That wasn't my intention."

"Don't worry about it, got myself sorted out."

"Okay good," he exhaled. Looked forward again, kneading his hands. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well..." He looked uneasy. "You know..."

Sirius frowned. "That's nice of you. But I don't think you have an accurate idea of my problems." Sometimes not even Sirius himself did.

His tone managed to silence Leo for a bit. But not for very long.

"You play guitar?" Leo at least seemed to have sensed Sirius's silent order to change the subject.

"How do you know?"

"Saw your Gibson sitting in the living room. It looks really rad."

"Thanks." Sirius took a deep breath, trying to appreciate Leo's good intentions. "Do you play too?" he managed to wrestle out.

Leo turned to Sirius so that his back was now pressing against the

banister. "Yeah, but not guitar. Drums."

"Oh, not bad either. I wouldn't have room for that here."

Leo smiled, as if glad of the answer.

"How long have you been playing?"

"Phew, two years, roughly. I'm not so shit by now either, I guess."

Leo's smile widened, Sirius wasn't sure why.

"Sounds cool. I'd really like to hear you play sometime," he replied, and seemed to be in thought for a second. Then, a thin smile on his face, he continued. "If you feel like it you can come visit me some time. Or join our rehearsal. Me and my friends play together from time to time."

Our rehearsal. That didn't sound good. It sounded too much like a reunion, like contact, like trouble.

"No thank you", Sirius said tersely, feeling unpleasantly overwhelmed and anxious at the mere thought. "And if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone now."

This time he seemed to have met the right tone of voice, because Leo tensed immediately.

"Yeah, of course. Sorry." He pushed himself off the banister and made his way inside. Sirius waited a few moments before he slowly followed Leo, finding him in the hallway, his shoes and jacket already put on.

"Can I leave you my phone number?" Leo asked quietly.

Sirius frowned. "For what?" It sounded harsher than intended.

"Just in case you change your mind. If you want to play, I mean. You can call anytime."

Before Sirius could decline, Leo had put a small piece of paper on the shoe cabinet and turned to leave. "Take care, Sirius", was all he said and, without looking back, hurriedly left the flat.

Seeing the door close in front of him was both the best and worst thing to happen to him all evening. He was *finally* alone. But that also meant that he was now subjected to himself, entirely.

He returned to the window still. Poured another glass. It was good, but not enough. Not with the parasite back inside his head, together with James's fearful voice. It was too much.

He emptied the whole bottle, slowly sinking to the ground, pressing his head against the wall, relishing in the cold, sharp pain. It didn't take long for the whiskey to guide him away, into deep darkness. Sirius willingly went with it, finally collapsing, disappearing, escaping the night monster once more. It was the only way.

Sirius was not all right.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: ‘Betäub mich/ Numb Me’ by Provinz ft. Casper

Chapter 52: Unshaken

Chapter Notes

CW Mentions of Suicide, Mental Distress

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May I stand unshaken

Amid, amidst a crashing world

"Oh, someone's on time!" exclaimed Rabastan Lestrange good-humouredly, as Remus strolled through protective screens and defensive curses, two crates of beer flying behind him and two bottles of firewhiskey in his pocket. He was definitely prepared.

"Wow, is this just for the two of us?" laughed Rabastan when he caught sight of the crates behind him.

"Sure," Remus said lightly, though he had no intention of drinking much of it. "We don't do anything by halves!"

"I like that." He stepped aside and let Remus enter. He immediately tried to get as accurate a picture of the place as possible. The Lestrange estate was not quite as grand as the Crouchs', but it still had a lot to offer. Through the front door they entered a small entrance hall, where wide staircases led up to the first floor on both sides. Straight ahead, between the stairs, they could see a large door at the end of the room, half-open and revealing into a no less expansive room. A gigantic chandelier hung from the ceiling, looking more expensive than anything Remus had ever owned in his life. He didn't see much furniture yet, though.

"Wow, your family really went all out," he said appreciatively.

"Yeah, they're all into fancy stuff like that. Sometimes it's annoying, they're always bragging about it."

"Very understandable." Remus would kiss Rabastan's ass so hard today. He would lie to him so shamelessly, trying to be his best mate without any character or dignity. All in the hope that it was actually worth it.

"So, come with me, my room is upstairs in the third," he said, already getting ready to leave.

"...Yes, in a minute. But uh, could you maybe give me a little tour of the house or something first? Really curious."

Rabastan looked at him indulgently. "Sure, I can understand that too. Someone like you surely doesn't know so much wealth yet. I'll be glad to."

Oh, you stupid motherfucker.

"We're lucky, no one's home but the house elfs until tonight, so no one will bother us if we wander around a bit."

That, again, was wonderful news. Remus swallowed his anger and obediently followed Rabastan, who was now taking a new direction.

He led him through the ground floor first, through decadence made flesh in the form of marble floors, walls adorned with gold and life-size statues. Remus briefly felt as if he had landed in an ancient museum instead of a three-generation house. The word cosy seemed as unwelcome as any form of blood impurity.

"So, there's the kitchen back there, but we're not going there now. That's no place for us anyway, only house elves work there."

"Oh, okay." Remus wondered if Rabastan even knew how to boil water.

After they finished on the ground floor, they made their way back towards the entrance, ultimately passing a heavy, locked wooden door that had an ominous air about it.

"What's behind it?" he asked casually when Rabastan made no move to comment.

Somewhat hesitantly, Rabastan stopped and shook his head. "It's not for you, sorry. It's the door to the cellar. Only family members are allowed in there. It's our property and stuff..."

"All your money is stored in there?" asked Remus incredulously, taking another good look at the door. It didn't look like it could be opened easily.

Rabastan shrugged and signalled Remus to keep walking. "Pretty much... My grandfather doesn't trust banks. But I suppose if he's not around at some point, my parents will take it all to Gringotts. My mother says the risk is too great otherwise."

"Cool." Remus thought he had found what he was looking for. If the Horcrux was in this house - which he was quite sure of by now - it would be hidden there. Now he just had to find a way in. Maybe Rabastan would tell a bit more when his tongue was a bit looser.

Rabastan showed him the other floors, which seemed a little less sterile overall, but had just as little personality. Rabastan told him something about almost every room, but Remus only listened in passing. He had another goal.

Finally they arrived at his room, although Remus had imagined something different. For by 'room' Rabastan probably meant a small flat with two connecting rooms and a small bathroom. That was bigger than half of all flats in London.

"You can put the crates here. Do you want anything else to eat? I'll let the house elves know."

Remus shook his head and headed for the living area, half separated from the bedroom, and from it the most comfortable looking armchair. The walls were hung full of posters of some magical bands, Remus didn't know the name of any of them. They all looked pretty grim, but not all of them were human, a few half-breeds were there too. Presumably this was Rabastan's version of rebellion.

"Alright." Rabastan fished two beers out of the crate and sat down in the chair next to him, handing him a bottle. "And how was your day?"

Remus sighed inwardly. This was probably going to be the most annoying part of the evening. It was easier to make small talk with a mountain troll.

"Oh, the usual," he grinned, toasting him. He was pleased to see that Rabastan took a deep sip. Was the boy ever not in the mood?

The minutes trudged into hours and Remus pulled out all the stops, even lowering himself to a conversation about a woman's 'best parts', although Remus was as clueless about that area as he was about quantum mechanics. Rabastan talked about them like a prole, probably because he was afraid people would notice that he had never touched a woman before. It only made Remus smile tiredly. He was by now far too annoyed by his ramblings to have any kind of indulgence left for him.

When he had had one beer himself and Rabastan had had five, he offered him a couple of shots of firewhiskey on top. Remus had a deep hatred for this particular drink, but he had been right in his assumption that Rabastan would like it. He managed to turn his own shots into water in time before he had to drink them, so he was able to pour several in a row. It only took a few minutes, then Rabastan was hanging in his chair, eyes only half open, a goofy, blissful smile on his lips. Finally.

"Have you actually been down to the basement? Where all your stuff is stored?"

Rabastan blinked lazily a few times before the shrugged. "Yeah, now and then. Don't like going there though, it makes me uncomfortable."

"Why is that?"

"...I'm not supposed to talk about it, Remyy."

In the end, when he had what he wanted, maybe he really would wring his neck.

"I understand that, of course." He moistened his lips. "But it's just us. Who would you have me tell, Kreacher?"

Rabastan chuckled. "He wouldn't get it anyway. No shit, house elves are so stupid sometimes."

"I'll keep it to myself."

"Sometimes I wonder how they even manage the chores, as incompetent as..."

"Are there any blatant traps installed or anything? Like in some action movie?"

That finally snapped Rabastan out of his anti-house elf rant. "Action

movie? Nah, so at least I don't think so. Not too familiar with that weird movie stuff. But there's some trappings, yeah."

"Oh, very cool. And which ones?"

Rabastan took a sip of beer and burped noisily. Remus feared he was about to vomit, but he seemed to restrain himself. Instead he gave him an amused sideways glance and lapsed back into his squeaky laugh.

"Quite nosy, Remy. But I can understand it. When you've never known it any other way, you don't realise the admiration outsiders have for your own family."

Remus shifted, thinking for a moment that he was going to puke instead. "Yes, the Lestranges are one of the most significant families of all time."

"That's right," Rabastan grinned in flattery and took another sip. Remus waited a moment and was relieved when he eventually resumed his question.

"Just the door you saw downstairs is fascinating. It knows exactly who touches the door handle. It won't let anyone in who isn't part of the family."

"Oh, wow," Remus said guardedly. "Does that mean if I had touched the handle..."

"Would have either electrocuted you fatally or burnt your hand off."

Remus sat back in horror. "Oh."

"Yeah, lost a few house elves on that one. And a slightly too nosy family friend."

"Wow, I'd better stay away from that then."

Rabastan laughed wryly. "I'd guess so. But even if someone makes it through there, that's not even it. You come down a flight of stairs where every other step has one of those movement things. When you trigger that, poison arrows shoot out of the wall from both sides. They also break through protection spells. And the poison kills you instantly, dude."

"Wow, that too?"

"You'd be surprised," Rabastan said with raised eyebrows. "Every

corner is cursed there. My aunt once said that anyone who touches the gold unlawfully will never get out of the cellar. Some ancient spell or something. Even I don't know everything there is. And then there's another separate chamber where no one really knows what's in it. Except my grandfather, but he's dead silent about it."

And Remus. Remus was pretty sure of what was in there, too. But that didn't make it much better. It was a cursed death chamber. How was Remus supposed to survive that?

"Exciting," he said anyway, smiling and sipping his beer. One thing at a time. The stairs wouldn't be much of a problem now that he knew about the sensors. But he had to get through the door. Only Rabastan could do that. But Remus feared that no amount of alcohol in the world could persuade him to get in there. Even he wasn't stupid enough for that.

Then there was only one other option left.

Remus poured him two more shots, waited until he dreamily let his gaze wander and began humming some wry tune.

"Oh, Rabastan, you've got something in your hair," Remus said eventually, after taking one last, big courageous sip.

"Oh really?" Rabastan ran his hand through his short, black hair and logically found nothing.

"It's still there," Remus said caringly. "Come on I'll get it out for you, turn around."

"Thanks, mate," Rabastan slurred, turning his back on him. But instead of removing anything from his hair, he drew his wand and pointed it at the back of his head.

"Imperio," he breathed, as quietly as he could. And Rabastan's body stiffened abruptly.

He really hoped he was too drunk to remember too much the next day. Maybe he would obliviate him to be safe, too.

"Stand up," Remus said, all friendliness gone from his voice, and Rabastan obeyed. He looked at him, his eyes weirdly grey and empty. Now Remus finally understood what Regulus had always meant when he said that you could see the curse if you looked hard enough.

"Go down to the ground floor and open the cellar door for me."

Without any hesitation, Rabastan set in motion, striding out of the room like a robot, and Remus followed, wand raised vigilantly in case anything unexpected happened.

They descended the stairs and strode through the entrance hall until they finally back at the door. Rabastan stood right in front of it, gently stroking the family crest embedded there, which consisted mostly of intertwined golden letters on a black background, as well as two stars, which Rabastan pressed on simultaneously with his fingers. Remus saw the stars give slightly and there was a soft click. The door handle tilted a few inches, barely noticeable. When Rabastan pushed the handle, the door opened smoothly. Rabastan pushed it open and wedged it against the wall. He then stood motionless and Remus looked at him in irritation before he remembered that he was, after all, waiting for Remus's instructions.

"You go ahead now, down the stairs. But in a way that you don't set off any motion sensors. You wait for me at the bottom."

Rabastan complied. He strode ahead, into a dark, narrow corridor, in which torches gradually came on as he passed them. About five yards in, the descent began.

It was a steep staircase, almost tempting one to use every single step. Rabastan held onto the railing and began to go down. Remus followed him gingerly, stepping on the very spots Rabastan used. It took what felt like an eternity.

Once down, Remus took a moment to orient himself. As expected, the gold chamber was large, with piles of galleons everywhere, money that was surely many hundreds of years old. Gems were also there, displayed in small cases or on thick, burgundy cushions. Remus did not dwell on it any longer than necessary. He let his gaze wander on, over golden armour and bronze statues, each more ostentatious than the last. To the end of the room, where a single, irritatingly plain metal door waited. It fit here as little as Remus did. He knew that was his destination.

"Take me safely to that door ahead," Remus ordered and Rabastan took a big step forward. Remus was a little confused at first by his strange way of walking, but then he understood that Rabastan only stepped on certain stone slabs. More traps. It took Remus his full concentration to follow him onto just the right slabs while keeping his

balance. When they finally stood before the strange door, Remus's back ached with tension.

"Get me through that door," he said, wasting no time. But unlike usual, Rabastan did not move. Remus frowned.

"What's the matter?" He looked searchingly into Rabastan's eyes, but the curse had not yet subsided.

"Take me through that door," he repeated gruffly.

"The door will only let through the person who opens it. There must never be more than one person at a time." Rabastan's voice sounded strangely tinny.

Oh, *great.*

Remus had a bad feeling. Would the door rip him apart just like the one upstairs if a non-Lestrange touched it? Or would something even worse happen?

"Fuck," he muttered softly. Then, before he could panic, he looked sternly at Rabastan. "You wait here. If anything happens, you warn me."

Rabastan took two obedient steps back and stood against the wall, as if turning into another statue.

Remus looked at the door, which might as well have led to a small storeroom, as prim as it looked. Somehow that made it seem that much more menacing. But Remus knew he had to try. He had already come this far. And how could he face Regulus again if he didn't?

He took a deep breath and gripped the door handle. It was ice cold. Tense to the limit, he held it for a moment, waiting for a reaction. But nothing happened.

Remus pushed the handle down and watched as the door slowly began to open on its own. Just as Remus was about to let go of the handle, a small, unpleasant pain shot up his hand and he pulled it away, startled. He looked at the inside of his hand and saw a wound the size of a pinhead with a single drop of blood leaking from it.

Even though this sent a shiver down his spine, he did not back down. Instead, he took heart, pushed the door open boldly and tried to see what was waiting for him behind it. But there was nothing but

blackness.

"Lumos," he whispered, creating a small ball of light that flew through the door and then, as suddenly as it had appeared, went out again. The darkness had swallowed it completely.

It was all very unsettling. Remus almost feared that he would end up just like the light ball when the darkness embraced him, but he knew he had to try. Heart pounding wildly, he stepped over the threshold, hearing his rasping breath in his own ears. He took one, two, three steps and felt himself tremble as the door slammed shut behind him with a loud bang, banishing even the last of the light. Remus was left behind, in absolute, all-pervading darkness. And his fear became so strong that for a moment he couldn't move.

A sharp pain shot through Remus's head and he winced. A headache was something exceedingly familiar to him, but it was so intense that he almost fell to his knees. He pressed his hands to his head and suppressed a gasp of pain. What the hell was that?

"...mes, you need to come now!"

Remus jerked his head up. The voice had been crystal clear, as if someone had been talking right next to him. Straining, he looked into the darkness, trying to make out something or someone, but his eyes just wouldn't adjust to the darkness.

"Please, hurry, hurry! He's not moving!"

He knew that voice. He knew it.

"...Lily?" he breathed, and that seemed to trigger something. In the distance, far too far away for the dimensions of the room, Remus saw a small light. He fixed it as if hypnotised and instantly started moving. It was as if he had no choice.

He ran and ran until the white light came closer, until it took shape. He recognised a kind of window, about ten square feet wide. He stepped closer, cautiously, completely taken in by it.

"James, James, he's not breathing! Oh God, oh God!"

He leaned forward, looked through the window, recognised the inside of a unfamiliar bedroom. There she was indeed, Lily, with her long red hair. She had her back turned to him, clinging to something Remus could only identify as it let out a helpless cry. It had to be her

son.

Lily leaned forward towards something Remus couldn't see. Her whole body shook. At the same moment, James popped into view and Remus, for a second, was very happy to finally see them again. The joy was short-lived, however.

"Shit!" exclaimed James loudly, walking past Lily and kneeling on the floor. "Shit! Shit! Shit!"

Remus leaned even further forward to see more. Too far. As if someone had pushed him from behind, he fell forward, through the window and landed hard on the floor. When he picked himself up again, he noticed that the window had disappeared. He was in the bedroom and there was no turning back. He felt increasingly dizzy.

Lily, James and their child were still there, but they were oblivious to him, their backs turned. Instead, their full attention continued to be on what was in front of them, what Remus still couldn't see. With difficulty he rose, overcome by curiosity, and stepped up beside Lily. At last he saw what was happening here. And Lily's words suddenly made an awful lot of sense.

"Sirius?" muttered Remus coarsely, looking down at the motionless figure being shaken incessantly by James.

"Wake up, Padfoot!" cried James at the top of his lungs, utterly distraught. But Sirius didn't move, his eyes dead and faded. Next to him were empty whiskey bottles, far too many of them.

The child was screaming loudly and incessantly, mingling with James's shrill shouts and Remus's stabbing headache. His legs began to shake so violently that they threatened to give way. Completely in a trance, Remus forced himself towards him, sank to his knees, grasped Sirius's hand. It was real, it was not imaginary. And it was cold.

At the same moment, James backed away, sobbing loudly, and fell into Lily's arms.

"Why weren't we faster?" he cried in despair. "I should have found him faster!"

"We did our best," Lily whispered. "But I don't think he wanted us to find him."

The words seemed to split Remus's skull open. Stunned, he bent down

to Sirius's still face. He'd seen a lot of corpses before. They usually looked strange, like dolls, barely resembling a human. Sirius didn't. He looked almost exactly as he remembered him. Beautiful, sublime, flawless. And yet dead.

"In the end, it was Remus's fault," Lily said from behind him. "He drove him to it. He ruined his life."

Remus reached out a shaking hand and cupped Sirius's face. It was at least as cold, almost caused pain on his skin. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Sirius," he repeated softly, bending to him and kissing him on the forehead. Then again, on the cheek, on the chin. His tears dripped down his face, leaving a trail of grief.

"I'm so sorry," he breathed, breaking off his kisses as his body shook with a sob. He had feared it might come to this, had had nightmares about it almost every night. But now it had, now it had happened.

"He has to pay for this," James whispered, his voice low and full of resentment.

"True," Lily replied. "He deserves to suffer just as much as Sirius."

"He deserves even worse."

Remus hugged Sirius's body, pressing his face into his soft hair, trying to breathe in his familiar scent one last time. But all he smelled was alcohol.

"Please forgive me," he whispered, his heart broken. He disengaged again, Lily's and James's words in his ears like a torture echo. Looked at Sirius again, never wanting to leave his side. He had to atone. For what he had done.

One more time he kissed him softly, on the cheek, right where his scar....

Remus paused, staring at the flawless spot.

"Sirius died all alone. And *Remus* drove him to it. Remus drove him to it."

Remus backed away from the body, alarm bells beginning to ring in his befuddled head. The scar was missing. That didn't make any

sense...

Where was he anyway? Wasn't he, just a moment ago...

"Remus deserves to die."

Horrified, Remus turned, trying to look James and Lily in the face for the first time. The only problem was, they didn't have one.

"*Remus Lupin deserves to die*," said the faceless woman, carrying a faceless child in her arms.

Remus startled, backing away from the figures.

"What is this?"

"*Remus Lupin deserves to die*," they continued as if they hadn't heard him. Remus's gaze fell to the floor where the body lay, looking less like Sirius with each passing second. His features seemed to blur until finally they had disappeared altogether, leaving an face just as empty as the others.

Remus looked around in panic, suddenly remembering the darkness again, the window through which he had come. But there was no trace of it any more.

"*Remus Lupin deserves to die*." The voices were echoing by now as if they were standing in a cathedral and it went straight through Remus.

"Enough of this!" he shouted, reaching into his pocket, incredibly relieved that his wand was still there. He drew it, pointed it at the faceless figures and screamed at the top of his lungs, "Finite Incantatem!"

They burst, into a thousand pieces. Remus raised his arms protectively in front of his face and felt a cold breeze. It had actually worked! It...

A hole opened up beneath him and Remus fell. He fell out of the bedroom, back into complete darkness. He screamed, but no sound came out of his mouth. Fell further, further, further, into infinite depths....

He woke up screaming. Like a drowning man reaching the surface of the water, he shot upwards, his breath convulsing, greedy. Panicked, he looked around. He was sitting on the floor of a small chamber lit

by pleasant, steady candlelight. Behind him was the bare metal door. In front of him was a single, plain glass case. In it stood a cup.

Remus tried to get his breathing back under control. What the hell had just happened? Confused, he looked at his palm, at the small wound, around which a gossamer purple network of veins had stretched, slowly fading under his gaze.

Remus didn't want to know what kind of curse that had been. He was just happy to have woken up again. A few more minutes and he would surely have gone insane.

Gingerly he rose, his knees still shaky. He took a deep breath and straightened up. It took him a moment to remember why he was here. He looked at the display case closely, wondering if another one of those curses was on it. The only benefit of his brief stint in hell was the feeling of numbness. He wasn't afraid of it. He just waved his wand and was surprised to see that the glass case opened really easily.

Helga Hufflepuff's cup in front of him, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. With a spell, he enlarged it.

Now he just had to get the cup in there. He didn't dare touch it directly, but a layer of fabric offered by his shirt was enough. He put the box on the floor and courageously reached into the display case. His hands were still involuntarily shaking, but he got hold of the cup and sank it into the box with a long exhale. He had done it. Unbelievable.

He shrunk the box and put it in his pocket. Without wasting any more time, he yanked open the metal door and stepped out of the chamber. He had no idea how long he had been in there, but Rabastan was still standing exactly where he had left him.

"Get me out of this cellar safely," Remus said chokingly. He had had enough of this place.

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Regulus looked at him, stunned, as Remus wordlessly slammed the box down on the table and turned around on the spot.

"Did you do it?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes. And I need some time for myself now, please."

"T-that's absolutely amazing. How did you...?" Remus didn't even hear the rest as he pulled the study door shut behind him. He went to the fridge, grabbed a can of the unhealthiest drink he could find in there and stepped out of the hut. He had no desire for a second clash like the one with Dorcas, so he avoided leaving the protective screen around it. Instead, he leaned against the outside wall, on the south side of the hut, stretched his face to the sky and let the sun shine on his face. It failed to extinguish the lingering darkness inside.

He began to smoke. One, two, three cigarettes in a row. Drank the can empty and then ashed into it, absentmindedly. He couldn't stop thinking about it. About Sirius. Of the words of the curse, of the truth in them. Even if it had all been a delusion, it had only brought back to his mind what was within the realm of possibility. It couldn't be too far away from what Lily and James really thought of him. And who knew how Sirius was doing. Remus had kicked him even though he was already on the ground. What if he really hadn't managed to get up? Remus had no way of knowing. Sirius was missing. Maybe something had happened to him. Maybe he was really dead. And maybe that was all his fault.

Remus Lupin deserves to die.

"Mind if I join you? I'll shut the fuck up too if you want."

Remus startled and recognised Barty standing at the door, leaning casually against the frame.

Remus did not refuse. He did prefer to be alone, but it probably wasn't a good idea.

"How are you?" asked Remus absent-mindedly, when Barty had sat down beside him and casually crossed his ankles.

"Oh, a little better every day. I'm just starting to feel the ceiling fall on my head in my room."

"Yeah, I know the feeling." Remus gave him a discreet sideways glance. He actually looked better. His cheeks were no longer so sunken and the burst veins in his eyes had healed.

"So how are you doing? Heard you were successful?"

Barty spoke softly, gently. Remus hesitated, but finally buckled. "Yeah.

It was horrible though. Got caught in some kind of curse and it really messed with my head."

"I see. But it's good you're back." That was it. No follow-up questions, no further comment. It was bliss for Remus.

"I'm so sick of all this shit," Remus whispered. Something he would never admit in front of Regulus.

Barty was silent for a moment. "I can imagine."

"I just want to go home." Such a childish thought. Home, where Sirius was waiting for him, playing his guitar and smiling so broadly that he got little crinkles around his eyes. That home no longer existed. Sometimes Remus wondered if it had ever existed at all.

Embarrassed, he sniffled and blinked, stretching his face upwards. He was so pathetic.

"And you can only do that if Voldemort is gone?"

Remus nodded, closing his eyes for a moment. It really sounded ridiculous. "At least then I'll still have a small chance of that. But by now I'm not even sure defeating Voldemort will be enough. I feel like my chances are dwindling more with every day I spend here."

Barty fell silent again. Remus used the time to get himself back under control.

"You're not at all how I thought you were," Barty said at one point.

"Oh really?" Remus snorted in amusement.

"Yeah, what do you think? The first time we met you punched Evan in the face so hard he talked about it for weeks after. What was I supposed to think?"

"True. But I was someone else at the time. Regulus made sure I became more tolerable again. He gave me back the most important part of me."

Barty gave him a sideways glance. "You guys seem to be getting along really well."

Remus nodded casually, toying with the idea of lighting another cigarette. "We do. I guess that just comes with saving each other's lives and sticking with each other for months. But I would never have

believed it. I hated Reg like the plague at first."

Busily Barty began plucking out some blades of grass, his gaze lowered. "He hated you too. So at least that's what he told me. I don't know how much of it was real. You don't know that with him most of the time."

Remus chose to ignore the bitter undertone. "Well. But that's how people can change."

"...Seems like it."

Barty seemed to be brooding over something and Remus, meanwhile, gave in to the urge and pulled the next cigarette from the pack. Just as he lit it, Barty rose and turned to leave.

"All right, I've had enough sun for now. Keep your head up," Barty said curtly and then disappeared back into the hut. Remus still couldn't really figure the guy out.

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Regulus fortunately respected his request and left him completely alone until the evening. This time it was him who cooked and put the food out for Remus. Only then did he take the opportunity to carefully ask if everything was okay.

"Yes, it's better now, thank you. I'll tell you how it went tomorrow."

Regulus nodded. "That was really brilliant of you. I'm so relieved you made it."

"I'm also glad I don't have to talk to Rabastan Lestrange anymore."

"Poor thing, he won't even know what hit him."

"He never knows."

Regulus laughed softly.

"I was thinking that this time you should have the honour of throwing the Horcrux into the fire. After all, I snatched all the last ones."

Remus smiled. "I'm looking forward to it. When are we going to do it?"

"As soon as you like."

Remus sat up, eyebrows raised challengingly.

"Tonight?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "If that makes you happy, fine by me. Need some fresh air anyway."

They took Barty with them this time. On the one hand to demonstrate the devilish fiendfyre to him and on the other hand to have someone else who could make it rain boulders if need be. Because even though they had tried new things again and again, so far only their first approach had ever really effectively encircled the fire. It was just a somewhat risky business every time.

Regulus had nevertheless made a few optimisations. He had only picked out caves with relatively small entrances that could be blocked quickly. In addition, he no longer hung on to his wands. As soon as he had lit the fire, he threw them away and thus gained a few precious seconds. It was by no means harmless. But at least it was no longer a near-death experience.

The two main reasons Remus had insisted on doing it that very night was, firstly, the satisfaction he wanted to feel when he saw that cursed piece of soul burn up. On the other hand, it was the chance to annoy Regulus once again. Because he liked doing that far too much.

"Oh my god, you'd think you were holding a wand for the first time in your life. How the hell did you pass your OWLs? Or do you just get them thrown at you when you're a Black?"

Regulus of course knew Remus wasn't serious. But even so, Remus always seemed to hit just the right kind of note to get Regulus all fired up anyway. It was wonderful to witness.

"Shut your mouth, Lupin!" he bleated in annoyance, waving his wand back and forth to no avail.

Remus didn't shut his mouth, going on and on until finally fire burst from the tip of his wand.

"Right, let's go!" shouted Remus, getting into position. Barty beside him was already pointing his wand at the ceiling of the cave entrance.

As soon as the fire had grown to its full size and Regulus had created some distance, Remus lashed out, the cup in his gloved hand. He pushed all the momentum he could muster into the throw and was satisfied to see the cup fly into the maw of the fire in a high arc. It wasn't a second before the cup was no more.

Remus breathed an inward sigh of relief, but wasted no time in running to safety. He was the first one out, Regulus had to make it exciting again. When he finally sprinted past him and Barty, they released their spells and the cave sealed itself with a loud crash and a ton of dust.

"Wow, I'm just never going to get used to this," Regulus panted, dropping exhausted to the floor.

"Remember, just one more time," Remus said good-humouredly, extending a hand to Regulus. The latter grinned at him approvingly, grabbed the hand and let himself be pulled up.

In a good mood again and full of adrenaline, he put his arm around Regulus and gave him a quick hug.

"Thank you," he whispered emphatically, and then released him. Destroying that hellish thing had done him better than he had thought.

Regulus looked at him indulgently and smiled. "You're welcome," he said. "The sooner we get rid of these things, the better."

"Absolutely." Remus looked up at the night sky. "Just one more now, Reg."

"Yes," Regulus said, though a little less euphorically than him, "just one more."

Regulus then led the way, away from the cave. Remus started moving too and glanced at Barty, who was surprisingly quiet, had been all along. Remus wanted to say something to him, something to make him feel not left out. But when their eyes met and Remus briefly felt like being stabbed by it, the words stuck in his throat. Irritated, he turned away again and joined Regulus.

He definitely and utterly couldn't figure this guy out.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Unshaken' by D’Angelo (I decided to replay Read Dead Redemption 2 a few weeks ago and started crying as soon as this song came on :‘))

I really hope you liked the chapters! :)) These two in particular were a lot of work ngl

See ya!

Chapter 53: I Don't Care

Chapter Notes

CW Mental Distress

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I try to make it through my life

In my way

there's you

I try to make it through these lies

And that's all I do

Leo had not only left him his number. On the crumpled paper, in neat handwriting, there was also a date, a time and an address. An invitation. And a reminder, of a bad night Sirius couldn't quite seem to forget. Not yet.

He threw the note in the bin a total of three times. And took it out again three times, staring at it, as if hypnotised. His harsh refusal had lost drive since his inner turmoil had calmed down and he had returned into his daily gloomy daze. But still he knew that it would be a mistake. And dangerous on top of that. He still mostly avoided daylight, out of a deep-rooted fear of being tracked down by Death Eaters who wanted to destroy any trace of the Order. Or by the parasite who Sirius knew would eventually come to finish what he had started. It was only a matter of time.

And still he couldn't let go of the note. Still there was, deep down beneath everything, a strange sense of longing. He didn't know what he was longing, though. But maybe, he could find out.

Some mistakes had to be made before they'd let you go.

***

The address led him to the outskirts of the city, to a house with a freshly painted white front, trimmed box trees and a two-car garage, both parked in front. The doorbell said 'Farrant family' and the doormat 'Welcome', in squiggly lettering. Sirius felt the urge to turn on his heel.

He still rang the bell. Surprisingly quickly the door was opened and standing in front of him was a middle-aged lady, greying hair and glasses with thick lenses. She frowned at him.

"Hello," Sirius said reluctantly, already regretting every decision that led him here.

The woman's gaze fell on the guitar case on his back. "Oh, you must be here to see Mathilda. She already said someone new might join today."

"Er, yeah right." *Mathilda?*

"Come on in. Just down the hallway, turn left at the end and then the second door. They're already setting up."

"Thanks." Sirius stepped into the house and was greeted by the comforting smell of frying bacon. It reminded him of how hungry he was. But then, that was nothing new.

The chatter in the garage could be heard from outside the door. Pausing for a moment, Sirius considered one last time whether he really wanted to do this. He knew a huge part of him didn't.

He still pushed the handle down and stepped through the door.

The garage was large, spacious, kept in good repair as only wealthy middle class people with too much time on their hands could. Tools hung neatly on the wall, shelves wiped clean, floor swept. The only thing that didn't quite fit into the picture was the drum kit, complete with speakers, set up in the middle and the three punks who had gathered around it.

Leo was the first to look after the sound of the door opening and catch sight of Sirius. "Oh, wow," he gawked at him, jumping up from his stool. "I'm so glad you changed your mind!"

Sirius nodded guardedly. In broad daylight, Leo looked completely different. Less mysterious and more like a guy who spent too much time indoors and slept too little. Somehow that made Sirius feel a bit safer.

He let his eyes wander to the other two. One was a young woman, with bright red shoulder-length hair and a pointed, friendly face. The other was a tall, corpulent man, with piercings on his face and a three-day beard. Between the two, Leo, with his dark hair and his stature not dissimilar to Sirius's, formed the middle in more ways than one.

"May I introduce" Leo gestured around him. "Our 'studio'." Sirius followed Leo's gestures fleetingly with his gaze.

"The acoustics are better than you might think," the tall man said, seemingly knowing how to interpret Sirius's expression.

"And these" Leo beckoned his two colleagues closer and put his arms around their shoulders. "Are my two best mates."

Sirius nodded suggestively. "Nice to meet you. I'm Sirius."

"Like the star? Ooh, it's the first time I've met someone with that name. Sounds really nice," the woman gushed.

"Wait, that's actually your name?" Leo looked at him, perplexed.

The corners of Sirius's mouth twitched as he nodded again.

"Wow..."

Sirius left Leo to his brief shock and looked at the redhead warily. "Mathilda I guess?"

That made the other two laugh. Mathilda only grimaced.

"Oh god, please call me Tilly. Please. Only my mother calls me Mathilda."

"Oh, sure."

"I'm Dave," the tall one added after he had calmed down and raised his hand in greeting.

"Hey." Sirius didn't quite know what to say to them. Talking with strangers wasn't his strong suit. And he didn't like it when people looked at him.

"Nice, now that we've all introduced ourselves, I suggest we get right to it," Leo looked at Sirius encouragingly. "I know you haven't had much experience with this sort of thing, don't worry about it. We'll just play together for a bit."

"Sounds good," Sirius muttered, setting his suitcase down. He was definitely worried. What the hell was he even doing here?

As he unpacked and plugged in his guitar, he heard an appreciative whistle.

"Not bad." Sirius looked up and saw Dave pointing at his Gibson.

"Thanks," he said, pulling the strap over his head. Pick in hand, he looked around at the others, who were also setting about getting their instruments ready. Leo took a seat behind the drums, Dave slung on a bass guitar and Tilly stood at the mic, another guitar pressed to herself.

"What can you play?" Leo asked him. Sirius considered. He had practised a lot of well-known songs, only now he could hardly think of any of them.

"Er, by the Stones... Satisfaction?" He phrased it more like a question.

Leo nodded eagerly. "Oh, I know that one by heart, fine by me." He turned to his friends, who also agreed.

"Don't know every line, but I'll manage," Tilly added with a thumbs up.

"Well then." Leo raised the drumsticks and counted off. And then they got started.

It wasn't a difficult song, good for a warm-up. It helped Sirius shed his nervousness a little. He did slip up a few times, but it didn't seem to matter. It really didn't sound bad.

He was especially pleasantly surprised by Tilly. She was a good singer. Mick Jagger wasn't quite her vocal range, but she covered it great, had a strong, almost raspy singing voice that barely resembled her normal speaking voice.

"Guys," Leo said as the last notes faded. He had a big grin on his face. "That sounded great!"

Sirius pressed against his guitar. He was right. They did sound good together, even with him. Two years of practicing alone in his room like a madman had paid off after all, it seemed.

Sirius suggested a few other songs, which they practised. Some they knew by heart, for others they prepared sheet music or freestyled. But no matter what they did, it always sounded good in the end. Sirius got so into it, that everything around him seemed to fade for a while. He didn't know that could still happen.

It was fun.

Before Sirius knew it, the rehearsal was over. Leo stretched and rose from his stool. "That was amazing," he repeated for what must have been the tenth time. "If you're up for it, we practice every other Saturday here at Tilly's parents' house. You're welcome to come back."

Dave nodded affirmatively. "I agree. You've got a good tact."

"Thanks," Sirius rubbed the back of his neck.

"Well, next time we can show him some of our own songs" Tilly suggested and then turned to Sirius. "Most of them are still half-baked, but maybe you'll have the bright ideas we're missing."

"Sure."

"Will you help tidy up real quick?" Leo pointed to the drum kit and the speakers. "That stuff stays here in the garage, but it would need to be moved to the side a bit so the cars can get back in."

Sirius gently put his guitar back in its case and helped the others. A few minutes later they were done and ready to go.

"Do you all have to go to the metro too, or did you come by car?"

"Dave and Tilly are here by car," Leo said. "I'm here by the metro. We can go back together if you want?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Thanks for the rehearsal," Tilly said, escorting them out of the garage. Sirius had the faintest smile stuck on his face until he was finally on the tube with Leo half an hour later.

"This hasn't been this much fun in a long time," Leo said once it had set in motion. "Honestly, you really need to come more often."

Sirius averted his eyes. "That's just because I've rehearsed these songs a zillion times. I still have a hard time with new stuff or freestyle."

"Oh, that's not so bad. You've definitely got the instinct. With you we could really do something!"

"Wow, you have such high ambitions? I thought you only played as a hobby now and then."

"It all starts with dreaming."

Sirius looked out the window where the lights of the tunnels were flashing past him.

"Your friends seem nice. You must have known each other for a long time."

"Yeah, since primary school. They're the best."

"Did you tell them how we met?"

Leo 's face turned earnest. "No, don't worry. Just that we got to talking while partying. And if the subject does come up at some point, I'll enlighten them that there's nothing going on or anything. And they don't have a problem with that at all, they're really tolerant..."

"It's okay... I already thought they'd be cool with it." He was secretly glad they didn't know the details, though. He was still embarrassed about the whole thing.

Leo smiled at him thoughtfully and then glanced out the window as well.

"Are you alright?", he asked after a while, tentatively.

Sirius thought about it. On the whole? Absolutely not. But just now? With the music still in his ears and the familiar tingling in his fingertips?

"I think so." A strange feeling.

"That's nice."

They fell silent for a bit, Sirius lost in his thoughts. Up until Leo

pointed out of the window.

"Oh, don't you have to get out here?"

Sirius startled as he read the sign. "Oh right, thanks."

"I'll come with you. I only have to go two stops anyway. I can walk that too."

"Sure," Sirius grabbed his guitar case and got off the train as soon as the doors opened. It was busy at the station and it wasn't long before Sirius and Leo found themselves pressed close together in the crowd, picking their way towards the exit. Sirius was a little worried about his guitar and pressed the case close to him while he heard Leo swearing softly beside him. "Where do these fucking people always come from?"

Sirius continued to stare ahead, where he could already make out the main entrance and the crowd was thinning out a little. He was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he suddenly recognised a figure in the middle of the entrance. It was facing him, tall, ominous, cloaked entirely in black. There was a shadow on their face through the hood, but it was obvious that they were looking at him. Abruptly, Sirius stopped. Leo bumped into him with his shoulder.

"Hey, why are you stopping?"

Sirius didn't answer. Just stared at the figure, which looked far too much like a Death Eater to be a coincidence. Had he been found? Was someone waiting for him to kill him? He no longer had a wand, he was completely defenceless....

"Earth to Sirius! What's up?" Leo began to shake him lightly, but Sirius was only peripherally aware of it. Slowly he began to back away until Leo appeared in the corner of his eye, looking at him as if he had lost his mind.

"What's wrong?" He tried to follow his gaze, but stood at the wrong angle, unable to see the ...

At that moment, the figure turned a little to the side and the light fell on its face. Young, bored, eyes closed.

Not a Death Eater. Just a guy in a hoodie. Sirius slumped like a leaky air mattress. Holy shit.

"Sirius?" Leo sounded concerned. He grabbed him by the shoulder, gently this time, and waved his other hand back and forth in front of his face as if to wake him from a trance. At last Sirius managed to tear his gaze from the harmless figure.

"Yes?" he replied hoarsely, only now realising how wobbly he was on his feet. With difficulty he straightened up.

"What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost." He glanced around and then hurriedly pulled Sirius a few steps away, where the jostling was less bad.

"Oh, nothing." His voice didn't sound as firm as he'd like, unfortunately. "Just imagined something."

"What?" Leo looked at him urgently.

"Can we please get out of here first? I feel like I'm suffocating..."

"Sure." Leo grabbed his wrist and led him out of the train station, right past the mirage, which looked even more harmless up close than it did from a distance. Really just a complete stranger in dark clothes. And he made such an act out of it. What an nervous wreck he was.

Once they were outside in the fresh air, Sirius immediately felt a little better. Still, the tightness in his chest wouldn't go away. He leaned against a street lamp post near the exit and took a deep breath.

"Fuck, you scared me," Leo said with wide eyes. "Thought for a second someone was going to come around the corner and shoot you."

"Sorry," he said breathlessly. God, why didn't his body finally calm down? He was making this much more uncomfortable than it already was.

"Do you need something?"

He asked that with the same tone of voice as last time. It didn't make things better.

Sirius snorted, annoyed with himself. "No, thanks... Just tell me something, anything. It'll take my mind off things."

"Oh, I can manage that," Leo said, leaning on the other side of the street lamp so that they were both looking in the same direction. "What do you want me to tell you? Something about my life? About

my studies, from which I'll probably be exmatriculated soon? Oh, have you ever heard of the Milgram experiment? Or the fundamental attribution error?"

"The what?"

"Funny, that's the same look I had when my fucking professor asked me that in the oral exam." He started to laugh, but it sounded fake. "But that might not be a bad topic. The fundamental attribution error is a cognitive bias that distinguishes between..."

Leo began to narrate, and Sirius tried to follow him as best he could. He didn't understand much of it, didn't even know what Leo was studying at all. Still, it helped to bring his trembling under control. The pressure in his chest was easing too.

"... and from that you could conclude that we always blame our own mistakes on the situation and the circumstances and when it comes to other people we always look for the fault in the person themselves."

"Sounds interesting." The last bit actually managed to catch his attention.

"Yes, it really is." Leo looked thoughtful. "We change our reality in order to keep up our self-image that we are good people with good intentions. So we're much more forgiving with our own mistakes than we are with the mistakes of others."

Sirius looked at him. "And that's what you're studying?"

Leo laughed. "We'll see for how much longer."

"... I have an old friend who used to want to study at a university like that. Never quite got my head around it."

Leo hesitated. "What do you mean? Didn't you ever do an orientation course or something at school? There's loads of unis introducing themselves, so you normally get a really good picture of everything..."

This was getting dangerously far into Muggle territory.

"Not really." Casually, Sirius pushed himself away from the lamp post. "Thanks for your help, though. I'm really sorry, you must think I'm a right psycho. Two meetings and I have such a fit on both of them."

Leo straightened up as well and shook his head emphatically.

"Please don't think anything of it. We all have our bags to carry. I'm the last person to judge you for it when yours is heavier than most."

"Which bags are *you* carrying?"

Leo shrugged and smiled. "None that I could properly name. A mixture of life, and all the chances I don't take. But who doesn't have that?"

He started moving, almost buoyant, as if nothing had happened. "Come on let's go."

For a second Sirius glared after him, wondering where this guy had come from, and what he had done to deserve him. But then, before he could wonder where he was, he quickly set about catching up.

Leo didn't need any more proof of his weirdness, after all.

***

I'm changing everything

Cause you won't be there for me

The only advantage - if you really wanted to call it that - to the truth about Remus's fate, was the memories Sirius had gotten back. When he had still believed that Remus had deceived him from the beginning, every memory of him had been poisoned, every moment at Hogwarts, every prank, every smile.

Knowing now that everything had been fine until February 1979 hurt terribly, but was also a relief. He hadn't imagined everything. His Moony had really existed. The parasite had only haunted him for about 15 months. Terrible, traumatic, life-changing 15 months, but for that he could now remember the rest without having a breakdown. At least for a few minutes.

One of the things he thought about most was their first kiss. The only

one they had ever really shared. It had felt so honest and real, completely different from the rest. Maybe that was just the influence of the whole truth, but when he really thought about it, none of their other kisses had ever been like that again. He had just been too blind and in love to notice. Just as he had wilfully ignored all the other signs. That had cost him dearly.

It wasn't getting any easier. It probably wasn't ever going to get any easier. Sirius had resigned himself to it. The sleepless nights, the alcohol, it had become a part of him. As had the fact that he despised loneliness more than anything and yet had become addicted to it. This was the new him. Full of contradictions and cracks that would never close again. Full of questions that he would never get an answer to.

He stood in front of the phone booth for far too long. Not knowing how he got here again, after everything that happened after the last time. These few, weightless hours with Leo and his friends already felt like a dream, yet they seemed to have made him foolhardy. Hastily he pushed open the door before anyone else nestled in for a long chat and he could change his mind in that time. He rummaged the muggle coins out of his pocket and dropped them into the coin slot, then hastily dialled the number in the dial pad. It rang, once, twice, three times....

"Yes?" The voice on the other end sounded soft, but Sirius still recognised it immediately. His heart was pounding in his throat, just like last time.

He considered keeping silent again. It was so simple. Just listen to James's voice for a bit and then hang up again. Carry on as before, a nameless ghost in nowhere.

"Sirius?" Immediately, the voice got louder, agitated. *"Is that you?"*

Sirius stared, mesmerised, at the tarnished hook switch. He still remembered how furious he had been at James when they had last parted ways, how disappointed and hurt. It felt silly now, after all this time, after everything else that had happened. He wasn't angry at him anymore. He just missed him. So much.

"Hey, James."

Idiot.

"Oh my god," James inhaled sharply. *"Oh my God!"*

"Sorry." Sirius didn't specify. It applied universally. For everything. For all the thousand occasions.

"Where are you? Are you all right? Did someone kidnap you?" Now he was talking so fast Sirius could barely keep up.

"Everything's okay. No, I haven't been kidnapped."

"What happened, Sirius?" asked James chokingly. It gave him a twinge. *"Where have you been? I was so worried about you. I thought you..."*

"I'm sorry," Sirius repeated monotonously. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"Where are you? Do you need me to pick you up somewhere? Do you need anything?"

"No!" said Sirius hastily. "No, I don't need anything. I'm just calling to say you don't have to worry. And because I just wanted to apologise."

"Can we meet, please?" James sounded frantic, as if he was afraid Sirius was about to just hang up on him. A legitimate concern. *"I need to see you. Please."*

"I don't know if that's such a good..."

"Please, Padfoot. Please."

"Hmm." Sirius hesitated, knowing it would be another grave mistake. "Alright... If you want to." Hadn't James gone into hiding? Was he going to put himself in such danger just to see Sirius?

"Thank you," James said with relief. *"Where is it alright with you?"*

"Remember that one Muggle pub in London where we used to eat together? Preferably there. Next Wednesday around lunchtime?"

"Yeah," James said hurriedly. *"Sure."*

"Good." Sirius hated how embarrassed he sounded, how naturally James talked to him and how stiff and alien he himself did it.

"It's so good to hear your voice."

"Yeah." Sirius hesitated. "How's Lily?"

"Good, very good. She misses you like crazy." Silence. *"And we're both dying for you to meet Harry."*

Harry.

"Yeah, sounds good," Sirius said, noticing his fingers starting to shake again. "We can do that sometime, if you like."

"Absolutely." Silence again. "*Are you sure you're okay, Sirius?"*

Take a guess, James.

"Sure, don't worry about it. I'm sorry I caused you such worry." Maybe it was worth more if he apologised three times at once.

"I'm reassured then," James whispered.

"I have to go," Sirius said haltingly. "Haven't got any more change, I'm afraid. I'll see you Wednesday?"

"See you Wednesday, Sirius. Please take care of yourself."

"Always. Say hello to Lily and Harry for me."

"Will do." And then Sirius had hung up.

It was at least 30 degrees Celsius outside, but when Sirius left the phone box, he was shaking like a leaf.

It was far too soon for him, Sirius knew that.

It would be forever too soon. He knew that too.

But after all, some mistakes had to be made before they'd let you go.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'I Don’t Care' by Apocalyptica Feat. Adam Gontier (The US-Version!) (I know we’re entering Evanescence-Levels of emo with this song, but man, the violins!)

Chapter 54: Life Is Free

Chapter Notes

> This chapter exists because my two angels deserve it and I desperately needed it in my life. :)
> Sending you all love :*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The ins and outs of working around you

That simple task is not ordinary now

But I'll stay around

I get knocked out when I think about it

I'm not the same since I let my thoughts out loud

Is that allowed?

Regulus had rested his head sideways on the desk and watched as the little Sickle spun on its own axis. It held on for a long time, but finally lost its balance and fell onto the old wood. Regulus grabbed it again, stood it up and made it dance again, for a few more moments. The game went on like this for what must have been an hour.

How did you find something that most people didn't even believe existed?

Regulus set the Sickle back up and gave it a sweeping spin. After Slytherin's medallion and Hufflepuff's cup, Rawnclaw's diadem was the only remaining Founder's piece that was of interest to him. Even what it implied, represented, shrewdness, cleverness, superiority... these were things Voldemort had always been far too eager to ascribe to himself. He automatically would feel connected to it.

During the next round, Regulus lifted his head and propped his chin on the back of his hand. His gaze fixed on the edge of the table, he listened to the coin flip and considered once more what had ever been

important in the life of a man like Voldemort.

A soft knock jolted him out of his thoughts. The Sickle beside him came to rest and stayed that way this time, the sudden silence unfamiliar to Regulus's ears.

"Yes?" he said, clearing his throat when he heard how strained his voice sounded. He had barely said anything all day. A glance out the window told him it was already getting close to evening again.

The door swung open, hesitantly, and Barty stood in the doorway. He had lowered his gaze.

"Have you seen Remus?"

Regulus shook his head suggestively. "He's not here. Got a last-minute assignment this morning and left right away. No idea when he'll be back."

"Oh, okay."

"Everything alright? Is there anything I can help you with instead?" He hated how formal he sounded. Like he was the receptionist at some big company talking to a new client.

"No," Barty said casually, averting his eyes. "Just wanted to say goodbye to him."

Goodbye.

"Why is that?"

"Because I'm getting out of here tomorrow morning."

"I see."

So there it was. Regulus had seen it coming. At least since Barty had recently blocked every conversation Regulus had tried to set up. Had seen it in his eyes, in the way they had avoided him, never looking at him any longer than absolutely necessary.

But he hadn't wanted to admit it. He still didn't.

"Have you thought this through?"

Barty snorted. "Absolutely."

Regulus didn't let on how painful that one word was. The mask he put on instead was impenetrable. It fit him far too well.

"Where will you go?"

"I'll see." Barty was curt.

"Fine. Good luck to you then."

Barty nodded towards the floor. "Thanks. Will be in touch as soon as I have a safe place to stay."

"Good." Regulus wanted to scream.

"Much luck to you guys, too."

"Thank you."

Please honour us again soon, sir.

Barty hesitated for a moment, then almost imperceptibly shook his head and turned to leave. A second and the click of the latching door lock later, Regulus was alone again.

Barty would leave him. He wanted nothing to do with him anymore. He didn't need him anym...

Regulus rose, almost against his will. Rushed to the door, yanked it open. Barty, already on his way back to his room, turned around in surprise.

"You're not planning to do anything stupid, are you?" he asked dumbly, simply because he had to say something.

Barty frowned. "What do you mean? Something like letting me get caught? No way." He looked at Regulus, then added a quiet, "Don't worry about it."

But Regulus was worried. About so many things at once that he couldn't name a single one of them.

Barty seemed irritated as well. After Regulus hadn't said anything for a while, he tilted his head slightly, as if Regulus was slow on the uptake. "Is that it?"

No. Absolutely not.

"Is it really that terrible for you here?", Regulus finally managed to ask. He had to sound so whiny.

Barty sighed softly, closing his eyes for a moment.

"No, Reg, it's perfectly okay."

Regulus clung to the doorframe, the only thing that seemed to be holding him up right now.

"Then why do you want to leave so badly?"

"I don't feel like fighting anymore. This isn't my battle. I just want my peace."

Regulus tried to look like he understood. But he did not. Whose fight was Voldemort not? Whose life was he not threatening? Barty had enough reason to hate Voldemort by now. And he wasn't someone who hid.

"Besides, I don't want to get in anyone's way here," Barty added after a moment's hesitation, signalling to Regulus with his posture that the conversation was over for him.

But Regulus paused. "You mean at the Horcrux hunt? You won't get in our way there at all. You'd be a great help."

Barty laughed, oddly enough. One of those laughs where you couldn't quite tell if the person was happy or in pain. Barty had still half turned away, ran his hands over his face, and finally dropped his arms and shoulders. Regulus noticed once more how exhausted he looked. Was he really sleeping enough?

"Reg," Barty whispered, looking at him, his head tilted back slightly. "Why is he allowed to touch you?"

All at once Regulus realized what - *who* - Barty meant. He swallowed with difficulty.

"...Because I trust him."

Barty didn't let on whether Regulus's words had reached him.

"Why does he get to touch you when I want to so badly?"

Regulus froze.

"*Barty*..."

"I know. You don't have to repeat it. You've already made it perfectly clear how you feel about me. I also never thought I would become one of those pathetic assholes who can't get over a one-night stand. But here we are."

Regulus was speechless. Quite the opposite of Barty.

"It's not like I didn't try, Reg. I really did. But it was so fucking hard for me. And when I thought you had *died* in that cave, it crushed me. It made me realize I just couldn't live without you." Barty looked completely distraught. "And-and having you back now, but finding out that I just had to suffer because you didn't *want* me to know, and seeing how distant we are and how close you are with Remus... It's just too much for me. I'm so tired of it all. I can't take it anymore."

Regulus set about making a fundamental point, but Barty wouldn't let him get a word in edgewise.

"Don't get me wrong. You have every right to want him and not me, but then at least stop torturing me and let me go."

"Barty," Regulus said loudly and firmly. "I don't want Remus. He's just a good friend."

That made Barty pause for a tiny moment and finally look at him again. But in the end he just shrugged helplessly.

"Okay. But even that doesn't change the rest. I already tried to just be your friend back then, even though I suspected it wouldn't work. And now I absolutely can't do it anymore."

Regulus shook his head vigorously, detached himself from the doorframe and took an unsteady step towards him, before stopping himself. He couldn't even describe what he felt. Fear? Remorse? Guilt? It had been Regulus who had pushed Barty back then, Barty certainly wouldn't have let it come so far. But Regulus hadn't cared about the consequences. He only ever took what he needed at the moment, and that inevitably led to disaster. It was just like with James. History repeated itself.

Regulus understood Barty. For the first time since his return, everything, his sideways glances, his distance, his anger, all made sense. And if he really felt this hurt and tired, he more than deserved peace from Regulus and his emotional inaccessibility. And yet...

He took another step and grabbed Barty's wrist. He wanted to tell him something, anything, but he felt like he had forgotten how to speak. Barty looked angry, drew his eyebrows together and tried to shake him off.

"Let go of me," he said, trying to put distance between them, but Regulus's grip remained firm. He knew he was crossing a line, that he had to respect Barty's wish, but situations like this always stirred the basest instincts in him. In those small, reflexive moments, Regulus almost did what he really, in his deepest heart, wanted and not what was reasonable. Perhaps those were the moments when not a single mask would fit.

"I can't... I need you," Regulus whispered. That had never been in question. But between all the weeping over James, the self-loathing, the suppression of everything that might make him feel weak, he had never been able to admit to himself how much he needed him. How unbearable everything was without him. How often he himself, secretly, in the dark, thought of that one stupid little night. Of Barty's hands on his bare skin, the heat radiating from his body. It was one of the few repressed, positive memories Regulus had of his home. A hint of happiness in the midst of chaos and destruction.

But what did Regulus know about happiness? Other than how to nip it in the bud?

Barty had stopped resisting. He allowed Regulus to squeeze his wrist, while looking at him, waiting. What did he want to hear now? What could Regulus say to make him stay?

"But what do you *want*, Regulus?" asked Barty. The question it all came back to.

And Regulus was so tired of himself and his stuttering, evasive answers. He let them fall flat, this time. Let go of Barty's hand and instead took hold of his face and kissed him. It was easy. It felt right.

Barty didn't return the kiss, but didn't push him away either. Waited, motionless, until Regulus broke away from him again and looked at him carefully.

"*You*," he breathed, barely audible. Barty stared at his lips forming the word and Regulus felt an excitement inside of him, so great he felt like bursting. He wanted this, he told himself. Because he knew he did. But the battle against years of self-indoctrination was hard. That's why Regulus was immensely glad when Barty finally took over.

Their lips touched first. A few urgent steps later, with a doorframe behind Regulus, hands joined in. How Regulus had missed them. He put his arms around Barty, held him as close as he could, basked in his warmth and the soft noises they were making. He couldn't put into words, what he felt for Barty. But maybe it was enough, if he...

"Stop thinking already," Barty breathed as they broke away to catch their breath. He clasped Regulus's heated face with both hands, who was unconsciously seeking his lips again. "You only have to feel." Then he gave in to Regulus's silent plea and sealed their lips again.

Just feel.

Regulus looked into his eyes, that always looked black from a distance but were actually brown. A warm brown, sincere, steady, and everything Regulus had ever wanted. Their warmth stayed even when he closed his eyes, letting himself fall once more. Someone was there to catch him.

Maybe Barty would stay with him. In spite of himself.

It was only a dream. But a beautiful one. Regulus allowed himself to dream it.

And when at some point they had ended up on Regulus's bed and Regulus knew nothing except that Barty was there, holding him together and taking him apart, he whispered, choked, hoarse, exhausted.

"Please stay."

And Barty, the beginning and end of Regulus's world, paused for a moment, devoured him with his dark gaze, twisted his wet lips into a small smile.

"I'm not going anywhere," was all he said, almost casually. And Regulus's heart was so full all at once that he almost said something very stupid. He held it back. But that was also the only thing he held back. The rest he gave away, every doubt, every warning, every comparison to past heartbreaks. Until there was nothing left at all. Only what Barty gave him in return. And that was more than he had ever deserved.

***

The sun was most beautiful when it fought its way through thick rain clouds. When it brought just a few rays that hit the earth glistening bright. When any moment could be their last, when the next gust could bring darkness again, they were only truly special.

Regulus watched them as if in a trance. He had a blanket draped around his shoulders, sitting on a wide tree trunk that Remus had brought in at some point and that now served as a seating. He held a cup of hot steaming coffee in his hand, into which it dripped incessantly. It was only a very light rain, no more than a pleasant tickle on Regulus's face, a gentle revival, waking him up from a sleepless night.

Regulus took a careful sip and continued to watch the sun's rays fighting their way down to earth. Their golden light did not yet reach the hut, it was still in dark blue, morning darkness. But they were not far away. Regulus just had to be patient a little longer.

It was very quiet. Both outside and inside. Regulus thought of nothing at all. No diadem, no Voldemort, no dangers. It made him feel ten years younger.

The first thing to break the silence was Barty's voice, coming from the hut when Regulus had almost finished his coffee.

"There you are..." he said in a soft voice and Regulus heard his muffled footsteps on the grass. He turned to him and smiled.

"Good morning."

Barty wasn't wearing a jacket and had his arms wrapped shiveringly around his torso. "What are you doing out in this shitty weather?"

"Oh, it's not that bad." Regulus lifted his blanket invitingly. "Come and join."

Barty looked up at the grey sky with furrowed brows and finally surrendered.

"But only for a moment."

He joined Regulus on the tree trunk and allowed Regulus to wrap the blanket around him and hug him close. The gesture made Barty smile. "Okay, you're right. It's not bad at all."

Regulus rolled his eyes and rested his head against Barty's shoulder. He felt Barty tilt his head towards Regulus and lean against him as well.

"I was afraid you'd run away from me again," Barty murmured after a while of amicable silence.

Regulus exhaled loudly through his nose. "No, I don't do that anymore."

Barty grabbed his hand from under the covers. "Since when?"

"Since today."

Regulus could feel Barty's smile. "Sounds good."

Regulus didn't want to ruin their little moment, but he just wanted to get it off his chest.

"Barty... I hope you know how sorry I am about everything."

He felt Barty shake his head.

"No more apologizing, okay? Things are what they are. I'm not mad at you anymore. Let's just forget about this shit."

The urge to apologise continued to be overwhelming, but Regulus pulled himself together. Barty wasn't mad anymore. But that didn't mean he wasn't still hurt. Regulus would have to learn to live with that.

"I'm... not always easy. As you may have realised."

That earned him a laugh.

"No, Reg, really you're not." He squeezed his hand. "But it's okay. I'm not perfect either. Nobody is."

"I just want to clear the air with you." *Finally*.

"I think I've got a pretty good idea of what you're trying to say," Barty whispered. "And it's fine."

Regulus paused. "What do I want to say?"

"I know I'm not him, and I know I'm not your great first love. It's okay. And even if you never quite get over him, that's okay too. I understand

that you don't just have good days. I'll take what I can get. I just want to be with you."

"No." Regulus felt a big lump in his throat. He lifted his head and looked at Barty, who returned his gaze questioningly, their faces only inches apart.

"What 'no'?"

"Stop saying stuff like that. That should never be enough for you. You're *not* a second choice. You're so much more." Regulus felt frustration welling up inside, but he continued. "You're right, I did have someone I loved once. But it's over. He's happy with his family and I have made peace with it... I want *you*, only you."

Barty looked at him lovingly. "And you're no longer afraid that you might hurt me?"

"Yes, I am, terribly." Regulus knew it wasn't a 'if' question, but a 'when' question. It was inevitable. But perhaps it only made the small, sunny moments between the two of them all the more special.

He caressed Barty's face. "But that's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Thank god," Barty breathed, kissing him softly.

***

The sun managed to find its place in the sky, though the clouds didn't quite give up. Short, warm rays of sunshine, alternated with gusty, ever-increasing wind and rain. At some point Barty broke away from Regulus and sighed, "I really think we should go inside."

"All right," Regulus replied wistfully, rising with difficulty from the natural bench. His backside and thighs thanked him a thousand times over.

Back in the hut, Regulus changed and dried the wet blanket with a spell. It took him two attempts before he achieved the desired effect with his new wand. Remus sometimes brought him completely inappropriate ones. But he wasn't going to complain.

"Remus is still not back," Regulus stated matter-of-factly as he looked

at the short yew wand.

"Is that unusual?" asked Barty, glancing up from the towel he had just used to rub his hair dry.

"It is." Regulus glanced at the clock. "It's almost noon. He's usually here by then."

Barty shrugged, but probably saw from Regulus that he was worried. He touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Don't worry about it. Who knows what Voldemort has roped him into doing again."

He had certainly had to kill someone again. Regulus knew how much he hated that by now. But then again, Regulus hadn't felt the dark mark tonight either. Where was he?

Regulus wandered restlessly back and forth into the afternoon, trying to survey potentially emotionally relevant places for Voldemort, but getting no further. Every minute he looked at the door or the clock, praying that nothing had happened to Remus.

Please, he thought in a panic, not knowing exactly to whom the request was addressed. *Don't punish me just yet for that little sunny moment.*

Remus returned, but not until late in the evening, when Regulus's nerves were already completely shot. He had deep bags under his eyes and was walking shuffling, his shoulders slumped. Regulus ran towards him like an excited dog. Barty peeked out of his room too, his gaze sleepy.

"Thank God," Regulus said breathlessly, watching Remus kick off his shoes and collect himself for a moment. "You okay?"

Remus just nodded and motioned Regulus to accompany him to the couch. There he settled down heavily and massaged the root of his nose. Regulus waited patiently until he started talking on his own.

"They presented the fucking plan today," Remus muttered. Regulus leaned forward tensely. These words attracted Barty too, and he

stepped into the living area and leaned sideways against the wall, arms folded, at some distance. Regulus smiled at him briefly, which he nodded at with a serious expression.

"Operation Kratía?" asked Regulus cautiously, after glancing back at Remus.

"Yes. Reg, I'm telling you, this is so bad." Remus shook his head, giving Regulus a worried look.

"What's bad?"

"They want to raze the Ministry of Magic to the ground. Want to kill off the Minister of Magic and anyone else who doesn't cooperate. It's really going to be a coup d'état. And a mass murder."

"And when will it happen?"

Remus looked at Regulus almost apologetically. "Four weeks from now. 20th of September."

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"I know, that's very soon." Remus leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees, "But we'll work it out."

"You think?" Regulus pressed his hands to his forehead. He had wasted the whole night and the whole morning. With the weight of a thousand lives on his shoulders. He was such an idiot.

"Yes. Have you made any progress with the diadem?"

How Regulus hated that question. "No. I'm still at the point where I can't even be one hundred percent sure it exists. And even if I had the proof, I don't know where Voldemort could have hidden it."

To this Barty unexpectedly intervened. "Well, I wouldn't know about the second one either, but about the first one, you can just ask some Ravenclaws, can't you? I'm sure they'd know."

"What, that the diadem exists?"

"Yes, and maybe something about its specifics. Surely they learned about it at Hogwarts?"

"I really don't know what Hogwarts..." Regulus fell silent. Stared at the wall.

His gaze shot to Remus, who seemed to shrink under the force of his drive. "Where can I find Dorcas?"

Remus blinked in confusion. "Er, um, why do you ask?"

"She was in Ravenclaw, wasn't she?" asked Regulus curtly. Remus just nodded tentatively.

"Then I have a few questions for her."

And a request. Again.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Life is Free' by Slum Sociable

This chapter really made me happy lol
But there are dark times ahead! We're entering the final phase.

See ya! :*

Chapter 55: Mountain Side

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One step and I'd fall

fall til I'm gone

So lonely, so young

Too young to be no one

A person's true character usually revealed itself in the seconds before death. When no façade could hold out any longer, when the basic instincts, the deepest inner needs took over. It was usually a very telling moment. So it was with Albert Crabbe. As he lay bound before Dorcas, knowing that death was only two words away, he showed his true, unadorned face. It was not very flattering.

"Please, please," the pig whimpered, "don't do this, I have a son!"

"'You're so pathetic,' she just whispered, savouring every single bit of power she had over him. For the death curse itself was not painful enough. She would love to give him the same agony she had suffered every single day, for over two years. She didn't understand why he was even trying. He didn't seem to understand that his death was inevitable. That his life had ended the moment he had killed Marlene. An eye for an eye.

Dorcas raised her wand, allowing him and herself a few more seconds.

"Avada Kedavra," she then whispered, and silence fell at last.

A tiny moment it was. A tiny moment, of deep, pervasive contentment, of bliss. She had finally done it. At last she had avenged Marlene, after so long.

Of course, the darkness returned shortly afterwards. She had known from the start that revenge brought no salvation. But it had not made

it any less necessary. Dorcas had only done her duty.

And now she had to figure out what would come next.

The first thing she did was visit Marlene. She renewed the wreath as usual and sat close to her gravestone, as close as she could. Usually she had something with her, poems she thought Marlene might like, or something for herself to read. But this time it was just her, just her with her good news.

"I've done it, love. I finally got him."

She looked at the fresh flowers she had placed on the grave, which Marlene would surely have found terribly tacky, but which suited her so wonderfully.

"Feels strange. I've been fighting for this for two years, disregarding everything else. What am I supposed to do now?"

A few blackbirds sang from the chestnut tree beside her. If that was Marlene's answer, she sadly didn't understand it.

"I have to think about Lupin a lot. I've spared him, you know. I still don't know if that was a mistake." She looked for the birds in the tree but saw nothing but ripe chestnuts and slowly fading green.

"I don't know, Marls... You should have seen him when I told him about Sirius's disappearance. For a moment I thought he was standing in front of me again. The boy from school, I mean. I didn't know him very well though, I'm sure you would have recognised him better. But still..."

It didn't change what he had done. The deaths he was responsible for, the suffering he had caused. He did deserve punishment. But its severity lay entirely on what he did next. Whether he kept his word, whether he helped finally put an end to the war.

"What do you think?" she asked, leaning against the cold stone and stretching her face towards the sky. "Do you think I should help those assholes kill Voldemort?"

***

"Thank God, we've been looking everywhere for you," an agitated Regulus greeted her at the door, barely after she had knocked hesitantly.

"Why?" she asked with raised eyebrows. Regulus motioned for her to enter and she reluctantly complied.

"What is it?" She stepped through the doorway and saw Crouch Jr. sitting at the table, healthier and more alive than the last time they had met. He nodded gravely at her.

"You seem to be doing better," she stated before Regulus could answer her questions.

"Yes, very much. Thank you."

Dorcas shrugged. That had not been an act of mercy. At least, she hoped not.

"Your father's hearing starts next week, by the way. My instructors are sure he'll get a prison sentence."

"Good thing," Regulus muttered beside her, "he deserves a Dementor's kiss."

Crouch didn't look convinced. "I'll wait for the final verdict. My father has a lot of friends in the ministry, a bunch of judges as well, I'm sure. He can get out of anything."

"Not out of this," she said confidently. The bastard was going to get what he deserved.

She turned back to Regulus. "What is it now?"

Regulus pressed on. "Well... I know you don't want anything to do with us, but we're really in deep shit with the last Horcrux. And I think you could really help us with it."

Dorcas threw him a piercing look. Regulus held it impassively, which Dorcas took good note of. Then she let the hardness fall from her eyes and shrugged. "Fine by me. I'm here anyway because I wanted to offer you my help."

That left them speechless for the moment.

***

Maybe it was Dorcas's substitute. Her methadone that would now satisfy her insatiable desire for revenge instead. Killing Voldemort was a lofty, perhaps absurd goal. But that was what made it so promising.

She knew by now what Voldemort was planning, Regulus had told her at their last meeting, in a hushed voice that hadn't quite carried the gravity of the situation. The end of the magical world as they knew it. And even though Dorcas loathed the Ministry of Magic in her own way, she knew there was no way that could happen. So preventing that was something she could channel her energy, her destructive rage towards, without losing herself along the way.

Of course the was a fierce inner resistance to working with Lupin and his henchmen. But Dorcas also knew what Marlene would have said: evil had to be tackled first at the root. Only then came the shoots. Dorcas could take care of those later.

For now, she first had to find a ghost.

Hogwarts hadn't changed. Of course it hadn't, it hadn't for centuries. It was a fortified time machine, forever doomed to stay the same. Pitiful in its own way.

Still, it was bittersweet to return. And, above all, frighteningly easy. Perhaps the castle noticed that she had no inherently evil intentions, but she was able to just walk in, looking not much different from the other sixth or seventh graders, except for their cloaks. And something like that in the middle of a war? Dumbledore was getting sloppy.

She had the house advantage, knew roughly where to begin her search. She began in the Ravenclaw tower. That was where she had met the Grey Lady most of the time.

She knew whose shadow she was. Whose visage she wore, who she had desperately wanted to discard for many decades. The only problem was that the past could rarely be erased. It always came back, cyclically, chaotically, inevitably. And this time in the form of Dorcas.

She was very shy, most of the time. Especially around strangers. Fortunately, she remembered Dorcas.

"You're not a student anymore," she stated in greeting.

Dorcas smiled, hopefully reassuringly. "No, but I still have a request."

Dorcas wouldn't say it was easy. But she could handle such things by now. It was nothing that made her back down any more.

The shy, bitter ghost actually only longed for understanding, forbearance, forgiveness. Dorcas was possibly the worst person to actually provide her with that. But also the best person to credibly pretend to.

Perhaps there was another reason why she finally confided in her. Maybe it was her advantage as a former Ravenclaw.

Or maybe she just recognised the look in Dorcas's eyes.

***

"I'm almost certain the diadem is back at Hogwarts," Dorcas finished her summary, looking into three pairs of wide eyes.

"Crazy," Regulus muttered. "That you got all that out of her... Thought she didn't like talking to people."

"She does talk. At least sometimes." Dorcas undid her braid to relax her scalp. "Even though I didn't get the most important info... But at least now we know for sure that it's a Horcrux, and that Voldemort most likely brought it back to Hogwarts."

"Would make sense," Crouch agreed, "Hogwarts has always been the greatest thing for him. Surely he'd hide part of his soul there."

"But right under Dumbledore's nose?" asked Lupin incredulously.

"There are many corners of Hogwarts that hardly anyone knows about," Regulus muttered. "Maybe not even Dumbledore."

"For example?"

"The Room of Requirements." Regulus lowered his gaze.

"It's real?" asked Lupin incredulously.

"Yes, it is. Been there a few times."

"And you didn't happen to see a diadem or anything in it?"

"Not in my version. But that doesn't have to mean anything."

"It would be worth a try," Dorcas reflected. "I could take a closer look at it. I have no idea how to get in, though, or how it works."

"I do." All eyes fell on Regulus, who didn't look happy at all. "I do. I could help you."

He said it in a tone as if he had just signed his death warrant.

***

"I'm insane, completely deranged," Regulus muttered to himself as he strode beside Dorcas through the entrance to Hogwarts, completely unbothered. He looked like a lanky sixth grader, with ginger hair and fading acne on his face. And he was acting so suspiciously that it made even Dorcas nervous.

"Get a grip," she hissed at him, surely for the third time. "If you keep doing that, someone's really going to catch us."

"That's so easy for you to say," Regulus retorted, his appearance making his voice sound even more pathetic and squeaky. "You're an Auror, if they catch you here, the most you'll get is a few raised eyebrows. I'm going straight to Azkaban."

"You'll be fine. Don't get your knickers in a twist. You're not usually such a coward."

"You don't know that. You don't know me."

"But I know a different version of you. Quite well, actually."

That finally made the fear go out of him. "I'm not Sirius, okay?"

"Oh, you're a lot more like him than you might think."

"I don't give a shit about that. I'm fine with Remus talking about him all the time, you just shut up, okay?"

Oh, a whole new tone.

"Where are we going now?" she asked as they turned into an empty corridor.

He sipped his polyjuice drink like an alcoholic sipping his flask. "Seventh floor. Follow me."

Quickly he walked ahead, his nervousness seemingly discarded. Dorcas rolled her eyes and followed him.

The Room of Requirement had been more fairy tale than mystery to her as well, so she was astonished when, after only a few rounds of the corridor, a large, massive door suddenly appeared out of nowhere. She heard Regulus exhale in relief beside her.

"Thank goodness. I hope it's the right room."

"What did you wish for?"

"A hiding place for a valuable secret item... but probably indirectly a place where Dumbledore won't find me."

Dorcas sneered. "Everyone's so scared of that old geezer."

"Rightly so." Regulus approached the door, took one deep breath, then pushed it open.

They entered a room, gigantic in size, as high as a cathedral, and tens of times as long. In front of them, towers upon towers of junk. When Dorcas saw it all, her heart sank.

"Oh shit," she muttered as the door slammed shut behind them. Regulus, no less struck by the sheer size of the room, nodded slowly.

"Bingo," was all he said, just as unenthusiastic as Dorcas.

This one was going to get on her very last nerve.

***

Dorcas experienced the following, almost two days only as if through a fogged-up window. A mixture of overwhelm, boredom, which at some point turned into tiredness and hysteria. Time that slipped between her fingers and yet seemed to stand forever in one place.

As tired and irritated as she was at one point, she didn't even realise what she was holding in her hands all of a sudden. Blue sapphires, the squiggly initials *R.R.*. Was this...?

"Uh, Regulus?" she called out, holding the diadem away from her as if it were a baby that had just thrown up.

He didn't respond. She called out again, louder, her voice shrill. The echo carried it hundreds of yards. Then, a response.

"What is it?" he called back and even in his overdriven echo she heard desperate hope.

"I think I've got it!" She wasn't entirely sure, of course. She didn't know what a Horcrux looked like, how you could recognise it, if you could recognise it at all. But it just *had* to be Ravenclaw's diadem. If this was a false alarm, then she would most likely blow the whole room to pieces.

Regulus rumbled in her direction like a madman. When he was finally with her, he was breathing so hard that Dorcas thought he might faint. His polyjuice potion had long since run out, his black hair was sticking out wildly, his grey eyes were bloodshot. They grew wide when he saw it. His exhaustion, the traces of his last tantrum disappeared as they gave way to a big, overly broad grin. If only he knew how much he looked like Sirius at that moment.

Regulus grabbed her arm euphorically and began to shake her.

"Unbelievable!" he exclaimed. "You're the best!" Dorcas was a little taken off guard by the unusual euphoria. Though ii didn't last very long, for he was caught up with leaden exhaustion only a few seconds later.

"Oh God, I need to go to bed."

"Not only you." Dorcas too felt the exhaustion weighing her down.

"I just don't know how I'm going to get out of this place now," Regulus muttered. "How am I going to cover my face?"

Dorcas glanced at her wristwatch. "It's ten o'clock in the evening. There isn't anyone out at this time of night other than prefects or ghosts."

That seemed to only partially reassure Regulus. "We have to walk down seven floors and all the way outside the Apparation protection."

Dorcas shared his concerns, but of course she didn't let on. "I can't believe what a fucking wimp you are. And you've already destroyed four Horcruxes?"

Regulus narrowed his eyes and gestured to the door with a throwing away motion.

"Let's get out of here, now."

There you go.

"Right behind you."

***

Dorcas didn't know where Regulus got the energy from, but after they were back in the hut, he only took a short nap before he grabbed Lupin and Crouch and went off with them to destroy the diadem. Dorcas toyed with the idea of going home in the meantime, but she still wanted to discuss some important things. So instead she waited patiently, made herself comfortable on the armchair and closed her eyes. This way, their return took only a few moments.

"It is done," Regulus announced, completely covered in dust, but happy. Dorcas blinked the sleep from her eyes and nodded.

"Great, all that remains is the tiny, insubstantial task of killing Voldemort."

"Sorry, but I don't want to hear any more about that today," Regulus waved it off. "Tomorrow again. I'm going for a shower." And off he

went.

Dorcas turned her attention to Crouch and Lupin, who both grabbed drinks from the fridge and joined her.

"I'm really glad those cave adventures are over now," Lupin murmured, taking a sip.

"After all, they were completely suicidal," Crouch agreed.

Dorcas wasn't here for small talk, so she leaned forward, her hands clasped.

"We need to talk about the planned attack."

Lupin nodded gravely. "I know."

"I hope you've also had the epiphany that we can't possibly do this alone."

Another nod, more hesitant.

"The way Regulus described it, Voldemort plans to attack with all his people. How many Death Eaters are we talking about?"

"*At least* forty," Lupin murmured. "That's how many have been at the last few meetings alone."

"That'll be about right," Crouch agreed.

Dorcas bit her tongue. There were far too many.

"We need the Order. They have to help us."

Lupin scoffed coldly. "As if we could convince them. They want us dead, especially me."

"They do. But the fact that you're not being attacked, even though I'm in the same room as you, just goes to show how important it is to stop this fucking coup first and foremost." She scowled at Lupin. "Besides, I'm here as well. And they do trust me."

"But how much longer?" interjected Crouch. "I don't think they can all separate that as well as you can. If they find out you're working with us, they'll lose their trust."

"Maybe they don't need to know about us yet," Lupin murmured, his

gaze lowered. "We simply operate secretly, as we did before. They don't need to know who the information and the plan are coming from."

Dorcas shook her head. "No more lies. We play with our cards on the table. We both know the Order and Moody in particular. He wouldn't rest until he knew all the sources."

"But they won't listen to me. Barty and Regulus, maybe. But not me."

Dorcas looked at him. Again she could see it, at that very moment. The fragment, the shadow. The fleeting reference to the past. To something, to someone, that Dorcas had been so sure had been irretrievably erased. She couldn't describe the feeling it triggered in her.

"It can work," she shook off the feeling. "We have the facts on our side. And it's not like they have to forgive you either, they just have to cooperate." She looked down at her hands. "If we don't have them, we might as well just give up."

"And we'd best have some of your Auror friends with us," Crouch added.

"Yes, I'll take care of that. But the Order should be our core concern. They may be weakened and exhausted, but they are still the most experienced fighters against the Death Eaters."

Lupin looked indecisive. "If we really want to do this, though, we need a solid plan to present to them. We can't come up with any wishy-washy ideas there."

"I know. So let's get going."

Lupin, his look many times older than he was, just closed his eyes in surrender.

Regulus did not attend their nightly meeting. At some point, Dorcas herself noticed that her eyes were getting heavy too. But this was not something that could be put off. They only had two and a half weeks left for their plan and there were four of them at the moment. The thought would not let her sleep anyways.

They worked long hours on a first construct. Laid out the situation,

the external factors, the suspected capabilities of the enemy and that of their own forces. They did it the way Moody had always preached to them in the Order meetings.

Crouch stayed with them to the end, making surprisingly constructive contributions, even though he had considerably less experience with Moody's way of creating plans. But when they finally came to an end, already in the early hours of the morning, he rose exhausted.

"Sorry, I'm about to pass out on the spot," he just mumbled and took his leave.

"No problem," Lupin muttered, rubbing his eyes. "We'll continue tomorrow."

Dorcas watched Crouch disappear. The room he chose made her frown.

"Are Regulus and him sleeping in the same room?"

It made Lupin smile tiredly. "Lately."

"Ah." In retrospect, it made a lot of things make more sense. Much more sense, in fact.

Dorcas rose and turned to leave without much fuss.

"Get home safe... and thank you. For everything." Dorcas didn't like how comfortable Lupin started sounding around her, but she had no more energy for the sharpness that perhaps was required.

"I'm not doing this for you. I just want this nightmare to end."

"I know. Still."

Dorcas was already on her way out when something made her stop. She wasn't sure what. Maybe she wasn't quite herself at that moment.

"I spoke to Lily a few days ago," she said, quietly.

She didn't see his face, but she sensed the sudden agitation. "Oh. And is she all right? James too?"

She nodded. "She told me something."

"What?" His voice sounded strained.

"James met Sirius."

Silence.

"Really? How's he doing? Is everything okay? Has something happened to him?"

That worry. That unplayed, effortless, unbridled worry. It made Dorcas press her lips together.

"'He's all right, I guess. He's gone into hiding, as I suspected... And he doesn't do magic anymore."

She didn't say a word about what state Sirius was actually in. She couldn't deal with Lupin's strange feelings as it was. She waited until the words had died away in the room, until it was completely silent except for the soft buzzing in Dorcas's ears.

"Where is he?" he asked then, quietly. Perhaps he suspected the truth regardless.

And because Dorcas was not herself, and tired and stupid and careless, she told him.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Mountain Side' by Wezn

This chapter was rather fragmentary, hope it was not too confusing! I didn’t want to drag out the Horcrux-part too long, since we all pretty much know from the books/movies how that worked out. Still, it’s a very important chapter for Dorcas as a character.

Thanks for reading!

See ya! <3

Chapter 56: The Moon Still Shines

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas! <3 Here are two long chapters. And sorry about potential cliffhangers, I promise the next chapters won't take long :*

CW Depression, Self-Neglect, Mental Distress, Lots of Swearing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For we say to ourselves: In this sad life

Love is always the surest thing

And we know it won't always be there

But for now the moon over Soho still shines

There were two sides to Sirius Black. It only took Leo a few weeks to get to know them both. There was the lovely, warm-hearted Sirius, who had a quick wit, smiled and played the guitar really well. Who never revealed anything about himself, but still seemed sincere and happy to have been accepted into their little group. A great guy.

Then there was the Sirius he got to see today. The Sirius who didn't check in for weeks, skipped their sessions and disappeared off the face of the earth. The one who didn't respond to any contact attempts, whose curtains were drawn in broad daylight. The one who scared Leo.

He rang the bell insistently. He knew Sirius was there and he wouldn't leave until he heard some sign of life from him. It must have taken ten minutes, but then, finally, Sirius opened the door, just a crack. Leo couldn't make out more than one eye and dishevelled black hair in the darkness.

"Sorry Leo, not a good time. Come back next week."

He was about to close the door again, but Leo gently stopped him. "You weren't at rehearsal. We were worried."

"Don't be. Everything's great. Just want to be alone for a bit."

"Would you let me in? Just for a few minutes? I promise, then I'll leave you alone."

Leo saw dread flash in Sirius's eyes.

"I don't know if that's a good idea... The place isn't tidy."

"Dude you should see my place. Glad to see the floor once in a while." Sirius continued to look at him anxiously, so he followed up with. "Really, and even if last week's leftovers are lying around, I don't mind at all. I'm only here for you."

Sirius lowered his gaze. Coughed once dryly before finally saying, "Okay. But give me a minute. I'll open the door again, I promise."

Relieved, Leo allowed Sirius to close the door. Shortly after, he heard clanging and crashing, apparently Sirius was cleaning up at top speed. Then, a couple of minutes later, Sirius opened the door, this time with a light burning in the hallway.

"You can come in," Sirius murmured, and Leo complied. Sirius looked run down, his dark clothes wrinkled as if he had slept in them, but the bags under his eyes indicated that he certainly hadn't done that. He smelt. Of sweat and, above all, of booze.

"Good to see you," Leo said casually, following Sirius into the living room. Sirius pulled back the curtains, letting hazy, grey light flood into the room. The mess was really bad. The only thing that was clean was the living room table. Leo wondered what Sirius had put away.

"Go ahead and sit down," Sirius said casually. "Do you want something to drink? Don't have much to offer though, I'm afraid..."

"Tap water's fine with me, thanks."

Sirius nodded and went into the kitchen. Leo used the brief moment alone to take a cursory look around the room. It was only his second time here, and the first time it had been pitch dark. The living room was impersonal, the few cupboards barely arranged, no decorations or

mementos. The only thing that caught his eye, just two steps beside him, was a single, well-worn photograph leaning against a plain white candle. Leo recognised several people on it, but before he could take a closer look, Sirius was back again, holding the glass out to him.

"Thank you." Leo followed Sirius, who sat down on the small loveseat. As soon as he was seated, Leo took a sip, set the glass down and turned to Sirius. He had lowered his face, which only accentuated his gaunt, sunken cheeks.

"How are you?" Leo hated that question himself. But it was, after all, a shallow way to start.

"Fine."

"Why weren't you at rehearsal?" Leo tried to sound understanding. Sirius shouldn't take it as an accusation.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, should have called to cancel. Forgot."

"No problem at all. I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?"

Leo took another sip. "All right then."

It felt like Leo was sitting next to a statue, so little was Sirius stirring. And the aura he gave off gave him goosebumps.

"Has something happened?" he asked as gently as he could.

"Nothing important."

"Okay..." Leo moistened his lips. "Do you still want to talk about it?"

"Oh, it's really not interesting for you..."

"Try it."

Hesitation.

"Ran into an old friend."

"Oh, that's great! How do you know him?"

"From school."

Leo could already tell how tedious it was going to be to get the information out of him.

"Is he all right?"

Sirius shrugged. "He looked tired. Became a father last year."

"Probably doesn't get much sleep then."

"Is a boy, Harry's his name."

"Was he there too?"

Sirius shook his head. "I probably won't get to see him for a while."

"Oh, too bad." Leo hesitated. "Was there a reason you haven't seen each other for so long?"

"You're talking to it."

Leo understood. "Okay."

"It was stupid of me to meet him," Sirius continued, a little more talkative. "It just made things worse. James was crying, asking me what happened to me. Even though he knows."

Leo guessed that James was his friend's name.

"He must miss you."

"I miss him too," Sirius said, staring at his lap. "More than I can put into words."

"And still you keep your distance?"

"It's better this way. When I'm with him, the memories come back. I can bear them even less."

"So you moved here to get some closure?"

"Sort of." He interlaced his fingers, almost convulsively. "But I know now there's no escape. Not from this."

Leo didn't feel entitled to probe further into Sirius's trauma, nor was it any of his business. Instead, he decided to get some air back into his lungs. The small, cramped room drained any life energy out of him.

He rose, opened the balcony door so some oxygen could get in. He took a deep breath and looked up at the ever-cloudy sky.

"What school did you go to with James? One in London?" As innocuous as possible.

Sirius hesitated. "It was a boarding school. In Scotland. You wouldn't know it."

Leo threw him a quick smile. "Oh, one of those private ones? Like, for rich kids?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Sounds exciting. I just went to a regular school."

"You didn't miss out on anything, believe me."

Leo turned away from the balcony and returned to the couch. As he did so, the ominous picture caught his eyes again.

"Is that from there? Is James in it too?"

Sirius remained silent, staring at the picture. Leo paused. Had hoped that the picture was safe territory if Sirius had put it up openly.

But then, with a quick wave of his hand, Sirius gestured for Leo to bring it over. He complied, sitting back down with Sirius and holding the picture out to him so that he could get a good look at it too. There were seven people in it, it was winter, they were wearing long cloaks that were almost like capes. In the centre was Sirius, but he could only tell by the colour of his hair. Otherwise, it seemed like a completely different person.

"That's James there," Sirius said, pointing at the boy to his right, who wore glasses with round lenses and was grinning similarly broadly to Sirius. His finger wandered just a few inches away, to a pretty girl with red hair.

"This is Lily, his wife. Also a very close friend of mine."

"She looks very nice. They seem like a great match."

Sirius nodded, slowly. "I agree."

He didn't explain any other names in the picture, but Leo still couldn't help but look at them all. There was a short chubby boy, an amused

looking girl, with curly black hair, and a slightly reserved blonde. And then on the far right edge, a tall, lanky boy, smiling shyly. To his left, the photo had been bent, as if he had been folded backwards, as if someone had tried to banish him from the picture. Leo stared at the face.

Hastily Sirius stood up and put the picture back. "Well, those days are over."

Leo nodded, thoughtful. "What's left is to look forward."

Sirius didn't look forward, he looked at the dirty floor, probably seeing things that weren't there, or that were long in the past.

Leo's fingernails dug into the heels of his hands. Sirius was never really in the here and now. It was one reason why, from the moment Leo had met him, he had felt the overwhelming urge to help him. Out of his loneliness, this dark, never-ending downward spiral. He had already had to witness the end of it once too often. He wouldn't let it happen again.

"Tomorrow night, some friends are playing at one of the pubs on Broad Street. Do you fancy coming along? Tilly and Dave are there too. Just to get out for a bit. You don't have to stay long either."

Sirius took his time.

"Sure... Why not?" he said eventually, sounding like he needed to be brave.

"Great, I'm glad."

Sirius turned to him, looking at him silently. He didn't say it, but Leo understood that he wanted him to go now. So he didn't beat about the bush any longer.

"I'll see you tomorrow then?" he smiled broadly, even though it felt wrong.

Sirius nodded.

"Tomorrow."

***

Leo was immensely relieved when he saw Sirius come into the pub the next evening. He even looked a little better, had showered and put on fresh clothes. He almost resembled his good self again.

"Sirius, here!" he called, waving him over. He saw him immediately and pushed his way between the people standing around to join them at the table. Tilly, all sunshine, gave him a quick hug and patted him on the back.

"Glad you could make it."

"Just managed to fit it into my busy schedule," Sirius replied dryly, making Leo smirk.

He sat down next to Leo and across from Tilly and ordered himself a beer straight away. Then he looked around, a little uncertainly.

"And there's some friends of yours playing here in a minute?"

Dave waggled his head, which was probably meant to express a mixture between 'yes' and 'no'. He gestured with his thumb behind him to the corner of the packed room, where a small stage had been set up, with a microphone, boxes and drums, but no sign of a band yet.

"Aren't really *friends* per se. We've played the same venue before."

"They claim they've just landed a record deal," Tilly continued. "And we're just going to take a completely neutral listen to see if they deserve it."

"Totally neutral," Leo agreed with her seriously, giving Sirius a meaningful look.

"They're shit, aren't they?", uttered Sirius the unsaid.

"Completely shit," Dave agreed with him. "Well, we're also amateurs, but that's really a joke."

"I still think it's a PR stunt with this record deal," Leo muttered. "Otherwise I'll lose my faith in humanity."

"I'm curious then," Sirius said, accepting his beer.

"Don't expect anything, please. They're not even amusingly bad.

They're unpleasantly bad."

Sirius looked around. "Quite a few people did turn up for that, though."

Dave took a sip of frustration. "The poor people won't know what hit them."

"I'm looking forward to the moment when realisation floods through them," Tilly grinned, turning to Sirius. "What's been going on with you? Missed you at the last rehearsals. Leo said you weren't feeling well?"

Sirius shrugged casually. "Yeah, sorry about that. I get these migraines sometimes and I can barely get out of bed for days straight. Should have called."

"Don't worry about it. I'm glad you're feeling better!" said Tilly good-humouredly and fortunately didn't ask any more questions.

Leo had so far kept everything to himself that had to do with Sirius's mental state and his mysterious past. Even though it made him feel insanely helpless, he definitely didn't want to risk losing Sirius's fleeting trust in him again. He just hoped that Tilly and Dave, even without knowing about it, were doing as much for Sirius with their wholesome lightness as they were for himself.

"By the way, we have another official reason to drink today," Leo sighed.

"Oh, what is it?" asked Dave with his feigned concern.

"Got the results of my orals." He took a theatrically sorrowful sip. "I almost knew, but now I've got it officially."

Tilly patted his hand across the table. "Don't worry about it. Your professor's an ass."

Leo agreed exuberantly. "The problem is, he's also taking my third attempt. And it's oral again. I'm going to fuck up so hard."

"When is the third exam?"

"I don't have the exact date yet. In a couple of weeks. Early October sometime."

"It'll be fine," Tilly said encouragingly. "I can help you study."

"It's more like I need something for my exam nerves. I know the material."

"And just switch your professor?" interjected Dave. "Just say you can't get along with him? That's got to work."

"The guy's a fucking dean there. If I turn him against me any more, I might as well forget it."

"I can't believe you put yourself through all that stress anyway," Sirius muttered between them, and Leo sighed in response.

"I wonder why sometimes, too."

They lifted their glasses, clinked and drank, Dave waiting until Tilly had started before nudging her with his elbow, so she spilled half her drink.

"You fucker!" she shouted, punching him in the side, which he just dismissed lightly, as if he didn't even feel it. Leo laughed to himself while Tilly piqued herself by drying her face with a napkin. Sirius beside him watched the game with interest.

"So, are you two dating?" he asked frankly, causing Tilly and Dave to turn into statues and Leo to burst out laughing.

"Oh Sirius, I love you for that," he chuckled as Tilly shook her head wildly.

"With him? No way!" she said, while Dave mumbled something into his beard. Leo almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

Sirius didn't seem to quite see through the situation, looking helplessly at Leo, who simply waved him off and gave him a look that hopefully said something like 'I'll tell you later'. Sirius seemed to understand.

Tilly covered her shame professionally by smiling and leaning forward, resting her chin on the back of her hand. Turning to Sirius, she asked, "Well, but how about you, do you have anyone?"

Leo tensed at the question. It felt like forbidden territory.

Sirius didn't let on outwardly. "Oh, no, there's no one." Casually, he took a sip. "I don't want anyone either. I'm better off alone."

Tilly looked at him sympathetically. "Oh, I know phrases like that. Had a bad experience?"

Leo had turned his face to Tilly, but was staring at Sirius out of the corner of his eye.

"You could say that." Then, gripping his glass tightly. "He wasn't the person I thought he was."

It all added up. All the little things Sirius had alluded to, his intrusions, his self destructive behaviour. It all fell into place. And that really upset Leo.

Tilly looked saddened as well. Sirius got a pat from her too.

"Sorry. Assholes like that are always around. They lie to you about everything and then when they've got you hooked, they show their true colours."

"Yes." Sirius's voice had gone quiet. Leo let a hand wander under the table, placed it gently at Sirius's knee. It was meant to signal support, but Sirius didn't let on if he even noticed the gesture.

"But don't feel bad, sweetie, be glad you got rid of that wanker." Tilly winked at Sirius and at the same moment, a scrawny guy stepped onto the small stage and started speaking into the mic.

"Hey, nice of you all to come. We hope you have an awesome night."

Leo leaned over to Sirius as the band members lined up on stage.

"The guy who just spoke is the singer, by the way."

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Oh okay."

"Just wait for his singing voice."

And it took exactly 20 seconds, until his first line, for Sirius to seemingly understand what Leo meant. Tilly was having the time of her life.

"Is he singing in English? I can barely understand a word."

Leo looked at him cluelessly. "You're asking the wrong guy."

They listened to the first song while all around them people gave each other horrified looks and mumbled into their drinks. These guys actually knew their instruments quite well. Especially the drummer was alright. But the singer completely ruined it.

"Wow, that was underwhelming," Dave murmured at some point when the band took a two-minute break, during which some of the guests had already left the pub.

Sirius laughed softly and when the next song started and the singer made a particularly crow-like sound, it degenerated into a fit of laughter, which Leo joined right in. It sounded wonderful. The first time he had ever heard Sirius laugh. And suddenly the band had a raison d'être for Leo after all.

The evening did not end very glamorously for the band. The final applause was more courtesy than euphoria, but the singer didn't let it faze him. He let himself be celebrated for a moment and waited for someone to call for an encore, but it didn't happen. Then, finally, they cleared the stage.

"My God, silence at last," Dave grumbled in annoyance, massaging his temples.

"Well, I don't need that again," Sirius said, still smiling.

"Neither do I," Tilly agreed, "But at least now we can be sure that the guy was just messing with me about the record deal."

"I'd have bet 100 pounds on that before," Dave said, indicating that they were about to order another round of beers.

***

Eventually they got their act together before it got messy and all said their goodbyes semi-coherently before Tilly and Dave, as well as Sirius and Leo went their separate ways in groups of two. They were barely out of earshot when Sirius asked curiously:

"Tell me about earlier. I didn't really get it."

Leo happily recounted the never-ending story of Dave's silent adoration for Tilly. At the same time the sweetest and most annoying part of their friendship.

"Oh. Well then, I suppose it's only a matter of time," Sirius finally

concluded the story.

Leo agreed. "It won't take that much longer. At least I hope that for Dave's mental wellbeing."

"They're a good match."

"Quite, yes. But I'm sure they'd be insufferable too."

Sirius smiled and kicked aside an empty tin can that was lying in the way.

"Listen," Leo said hurriedly, finally getting it out. "So if either of them gets too brash or nosy with you at any point, just tell them. They won't take offence."

"All right, I will," was all Sirius said, slowing his pace as they approached the intersection where they parted ways.

"Very well." When they reached their parting point, they stopped and Leo gave Sirius a quick hug.

"Take care. And by the way," he grinned cockily, having saved that for last. "I really hope you liked that location. And are free on first weekend of September. I'm still negotiating right now, but it looks like we'll have our first gig together!"

It had the desired reaction. Sirius's eyes widened, stage fright instantly visibly shooting through all his limbs. "Seriously? First week of...? That's so soon, that's... are you *serious*?"

"Sure. You're awesome and we are anyway. It's going to be great."

"But, uh, what are we even playing? And how many people will be there?"

Leo waved goodbye to Sirius and headed off. "I'll tell you at the next rehearsal then, honey. I'll see you there! Don't worry about it."

Of course Sirius would burst with worry. But maybe it was a change for him from his normal carousel. And one more reason to get up again tomorrow.

***

It worked out, that strategy. From then on, Sirius came to every rehearsal, even when they significantly increased the frequency. He was hyper nervous, but still more motivated than ever, pouring all of his creativity and talent into it. It was wonderful. Leo could see how good it did him, how much happier he looked. It also lifted the weights from Leo's shoulders. He really believed things were looking up for Sirius again.

But then came the night of their performance.

The minutes just before going onstage, Leo was a nervous wreck and questioned every single decision he made in life up to that point. Sirius was visibly nervous too. Had dressed up, his hair deliberately dishevelled, his eyes highlighted with black eyeliner, his gaze steel grey, piercing. Leo was sure he would steal their thunder. He would be great. He had earned it.

From outside they heard the drunken announcer start to introduce them. They were the last band to play that night, not because they were the best, the order had been drawn. But somehow the expectation was always particularly high for the end.

"Well, let's make some noise for our last gig tonight!" Only moderately enthusiastic clapping followed, but who could blame them. Most of them were probably pissed by now.

Dave poked him lightly in the side as he walked past. "Let's go," he whispered. And before Leo could get stuck to the floor in fear, he followed him.

There were still many people there, despite the late hour. The place wasn't too big, some people were sitting at tables, had their heads turned just slightly in their direction, others were standing around the stage, with some distance between them so that the speakers didn't deafen them. A few stood between the aisles too, all the way to the entrance, where some interested people leaned against the wall and seemed to be considering whether to stay.

Leo sat down at his drums, rubbed his sweaty hands on his trousers and picked up his sticks. The others also took their places, Tilly, who didn't look nervous at all, Dave as always calm and at ease, and Sirius, who gave him one last anxious look. Leo blinked at him encouragingly. At least it seemed to help a little.

Tilly gave a little speech, but Leo blanked her out. Thought of the sequence of their first song. It was the easiest to play, something shallow to get into. They would play five songs in total, three covers two of their own. It would work out all right.

When Tilly finished, he set the beat, one, two, and then....

Sirius played Blackmore's legendary theme, into which first Dave gently entered and then Leo. Finally, Tilly began to sing:

"*We all came out to Montreux, on the Lake Geneva shoreline...*" Leo just loved her voice. Of course, she didn't get to the pitch of Ian Gillan, but she didn't have to. She made the song her very own.

People seemed to like it too. Head bobbing, smiles, faces turned towards them, these were good signs. When the song was through, loud clapping. The sound shot through Leo's body like adrenaline, making him euphorically crave for more. He glanced at Sirius, who's eyes were wide, who couldn't believe people were enjoying this. It made Leo grin. That was exactly how it should go on.

It did. Adrenaline carried them through the next two covers and eventually even through their very own songs, which were received much better than expected. It was the best feeling ever. Worth every single excruciating minute of tension.

Sure, it was only a small location, and the guests had probably forgotten about them by tomorrow in their alcoholic stupor. But now they were applauded, even celebrated. What more could they want?

As expected, Sirius got most of the attention. He stood out among them, with his rough, daring looks and his expensive guitar. He hadn't made a mistake, at least Leo hadn't heard one. He was a natural.

As soon as they were off stage, a few people approached Sirius and engaged him in conversation and you could tell he was slightly overwhelmed by it. Leo contemplated saving him, but when Sirius just gave a barely noticeable thumbs up in response to his concerned look, he nodded and went ahead. Tilly got some attention too, only the drums and bass went unnoticed as usual. Dave and Leo just gave each other a quick knowing look before they went in search of a free table. As soon as they found one, Leo took his leave for the bathroom.

When he came back out of it, the mood in the bar was better than ever. The light was slightly dimmed, giving it a cosy, comfortable atmosphere that seemed to at least somewhat swallow all the loud,

piercing voices of the guests.

He stumbled through the rows of tables between drunks, past the entrance, noticing out of the corner of his eye a figure leaning against the wall, barely recognisable next to the overflowing coat racks. Leo turned to the figure and then, involuntarily, he stopped.

He was tall, darkly dressed, light hair. The face prominent... and scarred. His dark gaze fixed on something. Leo knew this face from somewhere, but his euphoria-drunk brain wouldn't come out with the info. It was only when he followed his gaze and realised it was glued to Sirius, who was still caught up in small talk, that it came to him.

The photo. The shy smile. The kink.

Leo looked back up at the guy, and a dark suspicion settled in him. Alongside it, regardless of whether that suspicion would prove true, came the certainty: this guy meant trouble.

In a burst of courage, he stomped towards the man, who didn't take his hungry, devouring gaze off Sirius even as Leo stood right next to him. A mixture of disgust, worry and anger began to boil inside Leo. It made his tone sound gruff.

"Is there a problem?"

The idiot didn't respond, as if he hadn't heard him.

"Hello, are you fucking deaf?"

Then, finally, his gaze shot to Leo, regarded him as if he were pesky vermin.

"Do I know you?" he asked indifferently. It sounded so snide that Leo clenched his fists.

"Listen, you're not wanted here."

There was a dangerous flash in his eyes. Leo had to admit that his scars, along with the visibly tense jaw and piercing stare were scary. But Leo wouldn't think of letting on.

"Says who?"

"I say that." Leo narrowed his eyes, voiced his suspicions. "You're Sirius's ex, aren't you?"

A thin, strange smile, Leo wanted to smack it off his face. "Ex? Hm." He looked to Sirius again, the smile slowly fading. This time Leo couldn't interpret the look, but he didn't want to, he could already imagine what he was thinking.

"Yes. Ex. As in *'over.'* As in '*no longer together*.' So leave him alone."

The guy straightened up, using his full height to look down at Leo.

"And who are you?" he asked, like a king to a serf. "His new flame?"

"What are you talking about? None of your fucking business. You're not together anymore."

He'd barely finished speaking before the bastard grabbed him roughly by the arm and dragged him into the anteroom, out of Sirius's, Dave's and Tilly's potential field of vision. There, next to a drunk lying in the corner, Leo was pressed firmly against the wall and felt a forearm pressing on his throat, choking the air out of him.

"How dare you talk to me like that?" he hissed at Leo, *very* close to his face. "You have absolutely no idea..."

"I know more than enough," Leo hissed chokingly, anger keeping him gruff despite his predicament. "I know you did terrible things to him, you violent asshole. You should be behind bars-"

Leo didn't see the punch coming. His head jerked up and a standing pain shot through him, so sharp that for a moment he thought his jaw was broken.

"Shut the fuck up!" the bastard shouted, so angry that spit flew towards him. "One more word and I'll kill you, I promise."

By now, at the latest, Leo saw red. He mustered all his strength and jabbed his fingers between the guy's ribs, eliciting a gasp of pain. The grip on his collar loosened a little, just enough for Leo to manage to push him away.

"Fuck off!" shouted Leo. "Or I'll call the cops!"

The bastard glared at him in a way that made Leo suddenly believe his death threat. He saw him start to rummage in his jacket pocket and feared he was about to pull out a knife. He took a step back. What the hell kind of psycho was this?

"What's going on?" Leo breathed a sigh of relief when he heard Dave's voice, stepping into the anteroom with the bartender. That made the bastard pause in his movement. Almost in slow motion, he pulled his empty hand back out of his pocket, eyed them both with mild interest.

"Nothing at all."

Leo shook his head wildly and looked at Dave urgently. "This guy's trouble. He punched me in the face just because I told him to stay away from Sirius."

He pointed to the still throbbing spot where the punch had hit him. He didn't see it, but he was sure that at least some trace could be made out. And above all, Dave knew that Leo didn't lie about such things.

Dave looked at the spot he was pointing at. Then, putting on his scowl, he turned to the guy.

"What's your deal with Sirius?"

He made no effort to answer, just looked at him with his fucking condescending manner.

"His ex," Leo answered in his place. "*The* ex."

Dave knew even less than Leo on the subject, but even that was enough. He gave the bartender a quick look that set him in motion.

"Mate, about time you got the hell out of here," he said, more diplomatically than he deserved.

"I'm just here to listen to the live music like everyone else. I wasn't doing anything until that little runt came on to me here."

Leo protested. "*You* smacked *me*-"

The bartender didn't let him finish. "Alright, the music's over. You can go now, then."

The guy didn't move an inch.

"Get it through your head!" shouted Leo, who was so upset he was clamouring like a defiant teenager. "No one wants you here. Sirius certainly doesn't. So leave him the fuck alone!"

A slow blink, a deep breath. Was that... resignation?

"Hm." He took one last, drawn out look into the crowded room, not wanting to let go for the life of him. "Then at least do me a favour and don't tell him I was here. Don't want to ruin anyone's evening here." There was something so off in his tone, Leo wanted to punch him. But a warning grip on his arm and Dave's fleeting sideways glance stopped him.

"Fine, this way out," the bartender said impassively, gesturing to the door. And after taking a few more seconds for *whatever*, the ugly prick finally disappeared.

Leo exhaled in relief when he was gone. Only now did he realise the tension he had been under.

"Thank you, Rich," Dave said, and the bartender just shrugged and returned into the pub.

"That was his ominous ex-boyfriend?" muttered Dave to him. "What the hell is going on with him? And what are those scars?"

Leo stared at the door through which he had disappeared. He had a nasty premonition that this wouldn't be their last encounter. And, as hard as it was, he knew he had to talk to Sirius about it.

It would be terrible though. The knowledge only grew heavier on Leo's mind when Sirius, finally released from all his admirers, came to their place, his face slightly flushed, his eyes shining. Leo had so hoped that the evening would help him, make him happier again. To destroy that again now broke his heart. He could hardly bring himself to do it. And Dave, too, kept silent.

He kept up the facade until they finally left. Leo had barely had a drink and both Sirius and Tilly must have noticed that his mood was cracked, but neither of them had inquired further. It wasn't until he and Sirius were alone again, walking side by side in silence with Leo staring at the ground, that Sirius finally spoke up.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Fuck, why did that asshole have to show up today of all days?

"Okay," Sirius muttered, audibly unsettled.

Leo took heart, stopped and grabbed Sirius by the forearm. Irritated, he stopped with him.

"Sirius, the guy in your picture in the living room, the one on the far right. That was your ex-boyfriend, wasn't it?"

Hardness came onto Sirius's features, effortlessly. It was frightening.

"Why do you ask?"

"He was there earlier. At the pub. He wanted to see you, but we sent him away."

Sirius's eyes widened, washing away the harshness until nothing remained but alert and rigid panic. He wrenched his arm from Leo's grip. "What are you saying?"

Leo raised his hands reassuringly as Sirius looked around frantically, searching for something in his empty pockets, and began to scan every face around them.

"He's gone, don't worry."

It didn't help, not a bit. Sirius didn't ask, no *'What did he want?'*, *'When was this exactly?'*, nothing. His breathing sounded strained, choked. It was exactly the same as on their first meeting. Just hearing about him did this to Sirius. Everything inside Leo tightened.

"Sirius, are you in danger? Is he trying to hurt you?"

Sirius's breathing became faster, more frantic. His gaze continued to wander, restlessly.

"I was hoping he wouldn't find me here." He said it as if to say, *'I was hoping I had more time.'*

"Should we go to the police?"

A shrill laugh escaped Sirius, making Leo wince.

"No. They won't be able to help."

"What the hell? Are you involved with the fucking mafia or something?"

"No." The word escaped him in the middle of a long exhale. It was as if he was forcefully pushing all the tension away with it, too. The fear was still there, in his eyes, but now he slumped his shoulders as if resigned. That was much worse.

"Then surely the police can help you."

Sirius shook his head, staring once more into nothingness. Leo hated that look. He took him by the hand to bring him back to reality. "Then at least sleep at my place tonight. Then you won't be alone."

For a few seconds Sirius didn't let on that he'd heard him.

"It's okay. It's all right", Sirius said in such a way that Leo was convinced of the exact opposite. He just gripped Sirius's hand all the tighter.

"You're coming to stay with me tonight. I have some bedding at my place."

Sirius shrugged weakly. It drove Leo crazy that he didn't say anything, that he didn't finally come clean. Who was this guy? And why couldn't Leo shake the feeling that Sirius's life was in danger?

Determined, Leo started moving again, pulling Sirius along with him. They stopped briefly at Sirius's flat so Sirius could grab a few things and then continued on to his place. His flat looked awful, but it didn't matter. He wasn't going to get a wink of sleep if he wasn't sure Sirius was safe.

He prepared the couch while Sirius stood beside him, lost. He was completely elsewhere, just following Leo's movements as if in a trance. Leo would give anything to know what was going on in his head, what the hell was happening. But he got nothing. Nothing at all.

He brought Sirius something to drink, waited until he had finished in the bathroom and lay down. Closed the door quietly, then stared at it for a full minute. What remained was a single bitter certainty:

Whatever this was, it was out of his league.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Love Poems, a collection of Poems' by Bertolt Brecht

Please excuse that I was vague with the band and song names, I was thinking SO long about it, but every single idea I came up with sounded so cringe to me, so I left it out lol. I don’t know how bands do it, I could NOT decide.

And don't worry, that was the only chapter out of Leo's PoV. Just thought an outsider's perspective might be interesting in this situation ;P
Also, that unreliable narrator tag comes into full play here! Poor cinnamon roll Remus was just pining from afar, but Leo took all the wrong hints :(

Let's see what kind of reunion the next chapter will bring...

Chapter 57: Chaos

Chapter Notes

CW Mention of Suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Take a last drag and then stub me out

I'm fine on my own

Go, but please don't replace me

Ah, didn't want chaos, I wanted you

Regulus was sitting in a row with Barty and Remus, on small, uncomfortable stools, because Barty had been too lazy to try harder with his spell. They all looked at Dorcas, who was standing against the wall, at a large white poster, gesticulating wildly with her wand. It felt a bit like they were back at Hogwarts.

"Okay, so we now have a rough idea of how Voldemort plans to proceed on the day." She pointed to the left-hand page, which had Voldemort's name on it, along with those of some important Death Eaters. "On the morning of September 20th, he will activate his sleeper cells at the Ministry. Lupin, have you been able to find out any names yet?"

"Four, yes. But I think there could be as many as ten. I'm still working on it."

"Their names are extremely important, with those up our sleeves we might be able to convince a few Aurors." She tapped the name *Bellatrix Lestrange*. "The sleeper cells will then work under her coordination and try to take out the security personnel around the Ministry without being noticed. Should they succeed, they would already have the best starting position: the gates would be open."

"What about protection spells at the Ministry?" asked Barty.

"They'll have them, I'm sure," Dorcas replied, and Remus picked up on that. "Voldemort is even counting on it. The sleeper cells are already scouting, I reckon a lot of it will be clear in two weeks. But even if they don't, breaking through something like that is their daily business."

Regulus nodded in agreement. It was the Death Eaters's speciality to deal with all kinds of defensive spells. Nothing the Ministry threw at them would stop them for long.

"Then follows the main phase of the attack, with *at least* 40 Death Eaters, as well as other supporters and maybe even black magic creatures. In their minds, it is not until this moment that the Ministry understands what is going on. Then Aurors will be activated, most of the others will panic and want to flee." She wandered on to the name *Rodolphus Lestrange*. "That's when Lestrange comes into action, with the rest of the troops, the rearguard. They'll be waiting outside to intercept and capture the fugitives. They won't let anyone go. And then give them the choice of either swearing allegiance to Voldemort, or dying on the spot."

"But that's only if they're not Muggle-born," Regulus added quietly. "They won't have a choice."

"True," Dorcas said dryly. "But I don't think any of them would willingly join Voldemort either."

"Most likely."

"What manpower do the Aurors bring, then? Can they hold against the attack?"

Dorcas shook her head vigorously. "No way. They're good, yes, but most of them are getting on in years and haven't fought a proper defensive battle of this size for a long time. On top of that, a few are deployed in other commitments, far away from the Ministry. I reckon a maximum of 25 Aurors will be on duty that day."

Regulus swallowed.

"And I know, blah blah, as an attacker of a fortified building, you're at a disadvantage and need high superior numbers to succeed with the capture. But as of now, they have them. And as of now, in addition to a highly professional assassin team, they have the element of surprise on their side. As of now, they will win."

In a fluid motion, Dorcas moved to the other side of the poster, where more names were listed, but this time from the Order.

"That's where we come in, though," Dorcas said. "We will need the Order to survive. I did some checking, there are currently 13 members I see able to take part in the fight." She scrolled down the names, all of which were listed. "We'll have to convince them first though."

"How do you imagine that?" asked Remus, sceptical.

Dorcas looked at him impassively. "I don't think it will be hard to convince them of the matter. It will be hard to convince them of you, though." She looked at them in turn, like convicts in the dock.

Remus next to Regulus looked to the floor.

"I will call a meeting, with all the members," Dorcas said firmly. "Then I will lay it all out for them, everything we know, every detail. And then, when they are clear about what a disaster they had just been about to slide into, then I will reveal who devised this plan."

Just thinking about it made Regulus's stomach turn. And yet he wasn't even the traitor in their ranks.

"They'll kill me as soon as they see me," Remus muttered, scanning the list of names and then pausing for a moment. "What about Sirius?"

Regulus followed his gaze. Sirius's name was missing.

Dorcas looked at him as if he were slow on the uptake. "I don't plan on Sirius. He's not in the Order anymore. He won't be fighting."

Remus shook his head. "Yes, he has to be there. He's one of the strongest fighters. We need him."

Dorcas blinked in irritation. Regulus didn't quite understand what Remus was thinking either. Sirius certainly wasn't in a condition....

"You should believe me when I tell you that Sirius no longer wants to be a part of this war."

"Why not?" continued Remus. "Surely that is all he ever wanted? Voldemort could be defeated! Of course he wants to be there..."

Dorcas took a rumbling step towards Remus, causing him to fall silent. Her gaze spat fire.

"Get a fucking grip! You're lucky Sirius hasn't *killed* himself by now, after all you've done to him! So leave him out of it and give him a break! He's *done* with us!"

Remus rose, jerkily. Regulus noticed his fingers trembling before he clenched them into fists. His whole body was electrified, as if he wanted to do and say a thousand things at once. Eventually he turned on the spot and stomped angrily out of the room.

Dorcas looked after him angrily and when the door had slammed behind him, she closed her eyes and exhaled deeply.

"The bloody idiot..." she muttered.

Regulus felt bad. "I'll talk to him."

Dorcas just rubbed her eyes.

Remus was sitting outside on the trunk, as Regulus had expected. He was smoking, aggressively and quickly, his everlasting, only coping strategy to get down. Regulus sat down silently next to him on the grass, directly into his tobacco haze.

"You should stop smoking," Regulus said, propping himself up in the grass, legs casually stretched out from him. "Doesn't help any more than all that other rubbish. Plus you get a gross smoker's cough."

Remus didn't answer, kept smoking as if it was the only thing keeping him alive. Regulus was silent, trying to give him his space, not quite knowing what he wanted to hear now. Because Dorcas was right, it wasn't a good idea.

"I saw him," Remus muttered at one point, exhaling it along with a waft of smoke so that Regulus almost didn't realise their significance.

When he did, he snapped his eyes open in shock.

"Who, Sirius?"

Remus nodded and took a drag on his cigarette. "Found him. Dorcas told me where he was. And I found him right on the first night. He's in a band now, can you imagine?" He gave Regulus an almost proud look, but it collapsed after a few seconds when he saw Regulus's face.

"When was that?"

Remus lowered his gaze. "The day before yesterday."

"When you said you had a mission from Voldemort?" Regulus crossed his arms angrily.

"I'm sorry," Remus muttered but Regulus heard perfectly well that it was a lie.

"Did he see you too?"

Remus shook his head, which made Regulus breathe a sigh of relief.

"That was a shit idea, Remus," Regulus hissed. "You can't just ambush him like that. He'll think you want to kill him! And that now when he can't even defend himself... Are you trying to scare him even more?"

Tension returned to Remus's shoulders, his lower jaw grinding. "How long am I supposed to wait? You said to me that fighting Voldemort and the Horcruxes was my best chance at his forgiveness. How am I supposed to convince him now if he doesn't even know about it?"

You don't.

"Sirius..." Regulus didn't know how best to say this. "He probably just needs some more time. Do you really want to put him in that kind of danger when he's not fit? He could die."

Remus aggressively stubbed out his cigarette and turned to Regulus, his gaze sinister. "All this." He pointed to the hut. "All this nightmare with the Horcruxes and all the danger of being exposed, I *only* did it for him." He bared his teeth. "Not for you, not for the Order, not for the fucking Ministry. Just for him. Without him, I don't see the point of going on with all this anymore."

Regulus looked down at the ground. He knew the anger was talking out of Remus, but hearing these words still hurt.

"You want Sirius to be happy, don't you?"

Remus turned away from Regulus again, nodding, almost imperceptibly.

"Maybe it's the only way. We kill Voldemort once and for all, so he can have his peace. And then, in a few years, when all this has died down, then you can try again. Maybe then he'll listen to you."

Remus snorted coldly. "You know what you sound like right now? Like

a fucking liar."

Regulus moistened his lips. "Remus, what do you want me to say? That he'll fall into your arms when you explain the plan to him? He might be the first step, yes, but it won't be enough. He needs time. A lot of time. Maybe more time than any of us have. And until then, why would we needlessly risk his life by throwing him into this battle when he hasn't held a wand in over a year?"

"Because I need him," Remus replied quietly. "Because I can't do it without him."

Regulus took a deep breath and then put a hand on his shoulder, gently. He didn't know what to say.

"He looked happy," Remus murmured further. "Much happier than he ever was with me. It was like a curse had been lifted from him."

"Remus..."

"He'd be happier without me, I'm sure." He blinked hard. "But I can't let go. I can't be without him, Reg."

The air seemed to grow colder around Remus. He lit another cigarette.

"You can continue inside without me. I need time for myself."

"Alright..." Regulus didn't want to leave him brooding like this, but he also knew Remus well enough to not provoke him any further. It wouldn't end well.

"You can always talk to me if you need someone...", he added, tentatively and Remus only nodded tersely.

Regulus sighed and returned back inside.

***

Dorcas rolled her eyes at Regulus delivering Remus's message. "Fucking waste of time. Sirius won't forgive him, no matter what he does. He needs to grow up and take responsibility for his fuck ups."

Regulus did feel sorry for Sirius, but he also felt sorry for Remus. As desperate as he had sounded... Regulus feared that Remus wouldn't help them if Sirius didn't. And that would put their whole plan in jeopardy.

Worried, he looked at the poster, at the list of names, stuck to several of them.

"Though I have to agree with Remus," Regulus said quietly. "I don't think it's such a good idea to do the big reveal in front of so many people. If it really blows up in our faces, we'll have a problem."

Dorcas looked at him thoughtfully. "What's your suggestion?"

"We should take it one at a time, at least with the key members. If we manage to get them on our side, the rest will join in too."

Dorcas sighed wearily. "I've thought of that too. However, then it would all be up to me and very time consuming. I'd be the only one they'd listen to, I'd have to talk to everyone."

Regulus bit his lower lip, searching for the name, finally stuck on it.

"Not everyone."

Though he dreaded that conversation more than Voldemort himself.

***

There was no elegant way to thread it.

No chance encounter on the way home, no gentle method, and no avoidance, as Regulus would have preferred. No, instead Dorcas lured James Potter into a safe house for an important meeting. She threw James - who really shouldn't be outside at all, but still was, because he was an reckless *idiot* - to Regulus like a piece of meat, and gave him no chance to escape.

A few weeks ago, Regulus might have had hope that it wouldn't be a complete disaster. But now that he knew how Barty had reacted to his return, how hurt, how betrayed he had felt, he had let go of that utopia. Now he just wanted to get it over with.

He must have stood outside the closed door for at least 20 minutes. Behind which *James Potter* was waiting. God, how many times had he imagined this situation? In Grimmauld Place, in the months after their break-up. Had pined for him so much he'd barely been able to bear it. And now that the time had finally come, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Maybe too much had happened in the meantime.

And maybe Regulus was too tired.

He knew his thought cycle. Knew when he had reached the point again where he would think '*now just do it!*', replaced by an anxious '*but, what if...*'. He waited for the first point as if he was on a broom and would go into a dive. Felt the same sinking feeling in his stomach, the same lightness before the fall. And pushed the handle down.

James sat with his back to him. Legs crossed, one arm leaning over the back of the chair, he looked out the window at the steady English rain. Regulus wondered, what he was expecting. Dorcas with a one liner? A couple of grim-faced members of the ministry who wanted to talk to him about dust-dry Order matters? Certainly many things. But not a small, almost anxious voice whispering softly, "James?"

Serenity left James like life leaves a tree after lightning strikes. He sat bolt upright, looking now rather as if he were sitting in a confessional, as if he had just spoken his worst sin aloud, for the first time. He did not turn around.

That alone threw Regulus off his stride. This strange reaction, combined with the sight of him, his shoulders, his unchanged messy hair, his narrow neck.

"James," he repeated, trying to find his voice again. "Look at me."

"You're not real," he said, as if shot out of a gun. "You're a trap."

As if Regulus were Medusa, as if he were a magical creature that turned him to stone when he looked at him. It was not an unfounded fear. They were at war. And Voldemort would use any means necessary.

What would the lost, lonely, 17-year-old Regulus say to him now?

James, I'm so sorry.

I didn't mean it.

You were right about everything.

I was so stupid.

I didn't mean for it to end like this.

I lo...

He narrowed his eyes. None of it would make any difference. None of it mattered anymore.

What would the now almost 20-year-old Regulus say instead? Who had found a purpose, who needed James to end once and for all the nightmare that had torn them apart?

"I heard you have a son now," he began, simply saying whatever came into his mind. "And his name is Harry?" He phrased it half as a question. "James, how could you? There I am chewing your ear off countless times about how Harry Haller is one of the worst protagonists of all time and you can't think of anything better than naming your son after him?"

Regulus saw the wince quite clearly. He almost had him, almost turned his head. But James caught himself at the last moment.

"Stop it," he said weakly. "Get out of my head."

"What's next, did you make Snivellus his godfather? Or will you name your next child after him?"

James was silent, his fingers clawing into the back of the chair as if he were suffering unspeakable pain.

Regulus took a step closer, careful so James didn't hear him. "James. Don't be afraid. It's really me. Ask me anything and I'll answer it."

But James kept quiet, lost in something Regulus could not see, not quite understand. Then, he remembered something and his lips formed the words, before he could stop it.

"*Happiness is not something you can look for. You just find it sometimes, somewhere by the side of the road, or under a stone, where you least suspect it. I found you, love, and I'll never let you go.*"

In the end, James's own words tipped the scales. Ironic. But Regulus didn't care. Now he could look into his eyes, which were as bright as ever. So full of life, so full of fear, sadness. It was all in them, a whole world. Regulus had lost himself in it so many times. It pulled at him, painfully.

James seemed speechless. Regulus experienced him like this for the first time in his life. He wanted to say something, make a joke to lighten the mood. But he couldn't think of anything, not a word. What was there to say anyway? Where should he even start?

James, quite the man of action, jumped up, rushed to Regulus and embraced him, so impetuously that Regulus almost lost his balance. Even though he was caught completely off guard and his first impulse at something like this was always defence, his body reacted all on its own, catching James, returning the hug.

That was it. The thing he had yearned for so long. It was surreal.

James clutched him, ran his hands over his back, pressed his face into his shoulders and breathed deeply, as if he had to make sure Regulus was real, not a trick, not a deadly curse. His body was so warm, so familiar, it was almost unbearable. Regulus felt traitorous tears gathering in his eyes. From the looks of it, he wasn't alone in this. It only took a few seconds before he felt tears soaking into his shirt.

"Reg," James whispered. "Reg, you're alive."

"I'm alive," Regulus said, trying not to get too involved in James's warmth. Concentrating, he looked at the wall behind James, trying to keep himself in check.

"I'm sorry I kept you in the dark."

James didn't reply to that, as if he couldn't care less what the background was. His shoulders shook slightly and Regulus felt it coursing through his entire body. It didn't make things any easier for him.

Before he spoke any further, he waited for James to calm down, to stop whispering his name over and over again while his heart palpably almost jumped out of his chest. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, James broke away from him and looked at him, softly, almost like he used to. Regulus had to avert his gaze.

"You've hardly changed at all," James continued to whisper, and

Regulus felt him softly stroke his cheek with his thumb. But then he seemed to regain his composure, took half a step back and cleared his throat. Shakily, Regulus exhaled, managed to lift his gaze again. James looked at him like the eighth wonder of the world. He wasn't necessarily making it any easier for Regulus.

"We need to talk," he forced out.

James didn't let on if he'd understood him, just shook his head almost imperceptibly and muttered. "How is that possible?"

Regulus sighed. "It's a very long story."

"Tell me, please."

Regulus took a deep breath. Probably it was best if he did. Reopen old wounds, review all the stupid decisions. It was the old, painful game. But maybe the only one that would convince James.

Regulus created another chair for himself, just as old and wobbly as James's. They sat down opposite each other, so close that their knees were almost touching, and James had leaned forward slightly, gripping Regulus's hand as if he would disappear otherwise. He hung on his lips, soaking up every word that left his mouth.

Regulus started from the very beginning. From the time after Hogwarts, his darkest hours. His journey to the realisation that Voldemort was scum and he was well on his way to becoming that himself. He recounted Remus's torture and brainwashing and saw James's features harden with grief and anger and his grip on his hand tighten. It made Regulus nervous.

When he continued, hinting at Remus's transformation, told of how he had slipped Remus his potion and he had started having nightmares and visions, he sensed James's growing tension. But he talked past it, talked about his research, about the Horcruxes.

"Voldemort did *what*?" asked James, uncomprehending. Regulus explained that to him too, calmly. It sent him into a frenzy that only made Regulus smile tiredly. More than ever, the last two years seemed like a fever dream to him.

Then he came to the cave. "I knew one of his Horcruxes was there and I had to get my hands on it. I went there with just Kreacher, didn't tell anyone else. I nearly died that night, but Remus saved me."

"Remus?" muttered James tonelessly.

"Yes. I wouldn't be sitting here if it wasn't for him."

James's expression was indistinct. Regulus continued unperturbed. "So I survived by a hairsbreadth. And then it occurred to me that I could just use that to go into hiding. To be able to search for the Horcruxes in peace, without having to kill for Voldemort." Regulus lowered his eyes, swallowed. "And that's why the next day the papers said I was dead. That was the reason."

"Okay," was all James said, and Regulus didn't dare look up. It was a completely different reaction to Barty's. Regulus didn't know what was worse, though. Before it became too much, he kept talking, kept steering towards Remus, and finally reached the evening when Remus had sought him out, distraught, and confessed to him that he loved Sirius. That was the moment James let go of his hand.

"Remus didn't love Sirius," he said tonelessly. "He betrayed us all to Voldemort. He tried to kill Lily and me."

Regulus closed his eyes. He could barely stand the tension. "No, he didn't, James. He was trying to save you."

"Stop it." And away it went, the joy of reunion. Regulus had already suspected it. It took all his strength to open his eyes again and look at James. Despite the harshness, the rejection.

"Don't you believe me?" he asked, trying to sound hurt. James grimaced, but didn't answer. Regulus bit the inside of his cheek. The pain helped him think more clearly.

"Do you think it was a coincidence that a few days before the attack Peter happens to find a letter where all the important information is conveniently summarised?" He leaned forward to emphasize his words. "Remus and I planted it there. Remus was forced by Voldemort to reveal your whereabouts. He did everything he could to keep you from dying. I promise you, if Remus had really wanted you to die, you'd be dead now."

"You mean like Marlene?" retorted James coldly. "Like Edgar? Like Caradoc? Like all those poor innocent Muggle-borns?"

"I never said Remus was completely blameless. But he's not the monster you think he is, he saved you both. And he loves Sirius more than anything."

James was already lunging for his next harsh retort, but Regulus didn't let him finish. "And he's done everything he can to make it up to you. What do you think we've been doing for the last year? We've collected all of those bloody Horcruxes, every last one, risked our lives to destroy them. And all to prove we were on your side."

"You found them all?" For a moment, James forgot his anger.

Regulus nodded. "Only Voldemort is left."

"That's..."

"And now we come to the reason I'm here," Regulus continued gruffly, disappointed that James had reacted the same way as everyone else. In terse words he told of the planned attack, of being outnumbered, of the plan to call a meeting with all the Order members to ask for their help. In the end, James sat back, exhausted.

"And Dorcas knows about this?"

"It was her idea."

"And she's helping you? Does she know Remus is in on it?"

Regulus had to stifle an eye roll. "Yes, she does. Even she works with Remus now, despite everything that's happened. Surely that should be enough for you to give him a chance?"

James looked completely overwhelmed. He looked out of the window again, just as he had at the very beginning. Only this time there was none of his nonchalance left.

Regulus didn't know if it was a good sign, but he carried on anyway. This time it was he who grabbed James's hand, forcing him to look at him again.

"James. I know a lot has happened, a lot of terrible things that can never be made right. But I'm still asking you," He took a deep breath. "If you still trust me just a little bit, after all this time, then believe me when I tell you that Remus only has your best interests in mind."

James looked pained, but he returned Regulus's gesture, intertwining their fingers. "You weren't there. You don't know how bad last year was because of him. You didn't see Sirius."

"I know." Regulus stroked the back of his hand with his thumb. "I

know. You don't have to forgive him either. But if he shows up at the meeting and speaks, please listen to him. We have to pull together, if only to kill Voldemort."

Silence.

"If we don't work together, we're all doomed."

Silence.

"Do it for me. It's the only favour I'll ever ask of you."

Hesitation. Then, a soft smile. James tilted his head, looking at him sadly. "How could I deny you that?"

Regulus returned the smile, squeezed his hand. "Thank you, James," he breathed. "Thank you."

There was a long silence between them after that, Regulus sitting there, leaning forward over James's hand, which he continued to clasp tightly. James had leaned back, turned away, looking out the window again. He did not look happy.

It was sad that their reunion was overshadowed by this. But he had achieved his goal. And James continued to hold his hand tightly.

"I read it, by the way," James said eventually, out of nowhere.

"What?"

"*Steppenwolf*."

"Oh, wow." Regulus smirked. "How come?"

James shrugged. "It was after you died. Had hopes that it would make me feel closer to you. It didn't help, though."

The corner of Regulus's mouth pulled back down abruptly and he tried to ignore the ache in his chest. "That book is depressing, though."

"Didn't think so at all. I liked the ending."

Regulus had to admit he didn't really remember it at all. But that didn't matter to him.

"I have a few other recommendations if you've gone among the Muggle literati now."

James exhaled loudly through his nose, perhaps there was the hint of a twitch at the corners of his mouth. "More like no. They use so many strange words. At one point I wrote Lily whole lists that she had to translate for me."

The thought of Lily made his hand tingle. Was this right, them sitting here like this, two former lovers who couldn't completely let go of each other even though they had built another life for themselves? Who had so much to say to each other, so many stories, so much sorrow, so much joy. And yet only remained silent. Under the weight of the dreary, merciless reality.

At some point they found a few more words, but the topics remained shallow, without any meaning. It was all they could manage. And at some point, when it was already getting darker and they were running out of trivia, they knew it was time to leave.

Finally it was Regulus who let go of his hand. The cool air around his warmed fingers made the loss palpable. He rose. "I have to get back now."

James just nodded, a little shaken, and stood up as well. For a moment they stood a little indecisively in front of each other, and James grabbed the back of his neck.

"It was nice to see you again, Reg. I'm so glad you're finally on the right side now."

"Me too." He meant it. Hugged him again, goodbye. It still felt surreal. When he tried to break away again, James held him tight.

"Please don't let this be a dream," he whispered.

Regulus stroked his back reassuringly. "No way."

James nodded, took heart and finally released Regulus. Looked at him one last time, unhappy.

"I wish things had gone differently."

So much was in that sentence. Too much.

"Me too."

But not every moment of his life anymore. Only sometimes now. Only when he looked at him like that. So Regulus averted his eyes and said

goodbye.

If true happiness really existed, then there were different kinds of it. And Regulus was ready to find them. James was not essential for that, not any more. Times had changed, and so had Regulus.

"See you around, James."

And then he left.

***

Barty was already waiting for him to return, running towards him, his eyes wide. Regulus was about to reassure him that everything had gone well, but Barty beat him to it.

"He's gone, Reg," Barty said, agitated.

"Who?"

"Remus." He shook his head. "I tried to talk him out of it, I swear."

"Out of what? Where did he go?"

Barty looked at him apologetically. "To Sirius. He's going to meet Sirius."

Oh no. Oh fuck.

That *fucking* idiot.

Chapter End Notes

> Songlyrics: 'Chaos' by Provinz (A big Jegulus song for me, together with 'Tanz für mich/Dance for me' by Provinz. Chaos is more from James‘s perspective, dance for me is from Regulus‘s and just so fucking sad... If I ever find the time to write a proper Jegulus fic this will be the theme song, 100% ;P)

I'm sorry! ;'/ Next chapter Sirius and Remus will meet again for real...

I hope you liked these chapters nevertheless! I had a lot of fun writing them <3

See ya! :*

Chapter 58: 5 March

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If you really just hate me

Why are you still here?

For what?

What do you still want from me?

What more do you want from me?

Selfishness. Nasty word, nasty character trait. No one liked to be *that*, no one wanted to be seen as the one who only thought of himself.

And yet there was no other word that described Remus better. What else was the reason for his ambushing Sirius while he was happily living his new life? What was the purpose other than to satisfy Remus's unbearable longing for his touch? He was selfish. And above all, he was desperate.

This time it hadn't been easy to find Sirius, he had to admit. But not impossible either. Everyone had to go outside at some point, especially someone who had stopped apparating for some reason. And like a compass needle pointing north, Remus was drawn to Sirius when he did so, it was as if he knew no other direction. Finding him was not a contingency, it was a given, a necessity.

He found Sirius on his way back to his flat, following him, concealed with a simple disillusionment spell that made people glance over him. He hadn't made a plan for this, had come here far too impulsively, was far too agitated just by seeing Sirius's back, the back of his head, his wonderful hair that he knew exactly how it would feel between his fingers.

Apart from his first moment of weakness in the pub, it was the first time he'd really seen him in over a year, outside of nightmares and curses. It was the first time Sirius was within reach, just a few steps in front of him. It made his insides ache, crave his touch, his kisses, his love. He had valued it far too little when he had had it. And now he was slowly and agonisingly starving from the lack of it.

Sirius didn't take the direct route to his flat, made a detour, through a small park nearby. Although it was afternoon, there were hardly any people there, just a few shadowy figures along the way, just as shadowy as Remus.

For a while Sirius walked silently, his head down. For Remus, this would have been a chance to think of a sensible strategy to start the conversation without Sirius panicking and trying to escape or kill him. But whatever he did, he couldn't think of anything. It raised doubts in him, was this really a...?

Sirius stopped, abruptly. It took Remus a second to realise it before he stopped too, hesitantly, quietly taking two steps back again. He watched Sirius closely as he slowly raised his head until his chin was tucked up like he was a king. How he took a deep breath, clenched his fists. Then, suddenly, he turned around in a flash.

Remus froze. Even though he was invisible, he felt caught, hardly daring to breathe. Sirius searched the spot where he stood, looking through him, and Remus was mesmerised by seeing his face up close and being able to really look at him. He was gaunt and thin, his hair longer, his arms full of intricate black tattoos that stood out diametrically from his unhealthily pale skin. His gaze burned like fire, still. Remus couldn't stop staring at him.

Sirius searched for what must have been twenty seconds before he finally closed his eyes, all tension drained from him again, and he loosened his hands once more.

Remus was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw Sirius smile. A small, fake smile.

"You can stop playing hide and seek."

Like a slap in the face. Remus didn't move, his pulse suddenly so fast it throbbed in his ears.

"I know you're there." It didn't sound like a shot in the dark. It sounded absolutely, utterly certain. But how was that possible?

He fixed Sirius, his grey eyes. And with a feeling in his gut like he was driving towards a wall with the accelerator pressed down, Remus raised his left hand and released the spell.

And there they stood, just a few steps apart. At the beginning of a dream. Or a nightmare. Remus braced himself for the latter.

Sirius had himself well under control. Remus had expected all sorts of reactions, had gone through each of them at least a dozen times in his mind. But he remained surprisingly calm, not seeming to want to show Remus anything of what was going on inside him.

Remus saw parts of it anyway, knew him well enough to see even the subtlest micro-expressions. The way he clenched his jaw, the way his eyes widened the tiniest bit, the way he inevitably backed away with his upper body, just a few inches. Mental state of emergency.

"Sirius," was all Remus said, hoarsely, not knowing what he was trying to say, his throat so tight he wondered he could get anything out at all.

Sirius wasn't afraid to look him in the face, but it was the sort of look that had haunted Remus's nightmares for the past year. The look Sirius had given him in Godric's Hollow when they had fought and Sirius had thought he was looking at a Death Eater. Revulsion, hatred, controlled fear. He had nothing else left for him.

"Are you finally going to finish what you started?"

It took Remus a moment to realise what he meant. Before he could respond, Sirius continued,

"Then do me a favour and get it over with quickly."

Remus shook his head, aghast. Did Sirius seriously think Remus wanted to kill him right here and now? And was just surrendering to it, not even fighting back? This was not the Sirius he knew. The realization stabbed him like a spear.

Sirius lowered his head as if he was already expecting the killing curse. He was ready for it. It shocked Remus to the point he couldn't say a single word.

"What are you waiting for?" said Sirius a moment later, emphatically monotonously. "Do it. I can't even defend myself right now."

"Sirius, no," Remus said, taking a step back. "I don't want to kill you."

"Ah." Sirius smirked as if Remus had made a particularly good joke. "Then do whatever else you want to do, I don't care. Just don't keep wasting my time."

Speechless, Remus stared at him, seeing his seemingly motionless form, his clenched fists that couldn't quite hide the trembling of his hands. He had never seen him like this before. It frightened him.

"I-I don't want to do anything at all. I just want to talk."

"About what?" He said the words in a way that left no doubt as to how little interest he had in it.

"About what happened."

"I think everything necessary has already been said." Only now did Remus notice that Sirius wasn't *really* looking at him. He was staring at the spot between his eyes, focused, as if it required all his strength.

"Although," Sirius admitted. "There's one thing I've always wondered." He smiled, as if remembering an old anecdote.

"Was it actually difficult? To pretend that you love me?"

Remus pressed his fingernails so hard into the palms of his hands that it hurt.

"No."

It was the easiest thing in the world. Because I never stopped loving you. Because it's the only thing I ever knew how to do.

"I thought so. You were always good at pretending."

Sirius was already so far away, Remus didn't know if he would ever reach him again. After all that had happened, after all the lies, all the betrayals, why would Sirius believe a single word he said?

"Stop it," Remus said quietly.

"Stop what?"

Remus had never known how disgust and derision sounded in Sirius's voice. He had been lucky. It was unbearable.

"What do you want?" Sirius continued curtly.

Remus took a deep breath, it didn't help the tightness in his chest.

"I want to kill Voldemort. And I could really need your help with that."

Straight to the point. Though that wasn't the reason for his visit, not really. But seeing Sirius like this was enough to know that anything else, his rambling professions of love, his tearful apologies, would only be hitting concrete. It was the only chance he had.

"Oh, interesting," Sirius nodded, like a geriatric nurse listening to the confabulations of his demented patient.

"Stop it," Remus said again, forcing himself to keep his voice steady. "I'm serious."

"Wow," Sirius went on, his trembling voice not matching his tone. "And you want me to come with you and help you defeat him? Where is the fight taking place, in my family home? In the torture chamber, perhaps? Would you like me to accompany you there?"

"At the Ministry," was all Remus said.

Sirius frowned.

"The battle will take place at the Ministry of Magic. Voldemort is planning to take it over on the 20th of September."

Sirius, for the first time, didn't answer directly, a small straw Remus clung to desperately.

"He's calling it Operation Kratía. He's already planted sleeper cells all over the Ministry that will become active at his command. I've gathered all the information I can, it looks bad. The Death Eaters are at full power. We are outnumbered."

"Who is 'we'?"

Remus had to start three times before he managed a coherent sentence. "So far, just me and..." He wouldn't unpack Regulus as well, Sirius wouldn't get past that. "A few other dropouts, but we..."

"Dropouts?"

"I'm not a Death Eater anymore, Sirius. At least, not really. I've changed. I want to do everything I can to finally kill him..."

"Just shut up," Sirius said, quietly only, but Remus's mouth snapped shut. "I don't want to hear it."

"Believe me." Remus wanted to pull his hair out. Christ, why couldn't he get out what he always wanted to say? "I-I want to make this all up to you. Sirius, I'm so sorry for everything..."

"*Shut up!*"

The volume made Remus take another step back.

"You can lie to me all you want, I don't care. But don't you dare ask me for forgiveness."

Remus, increasingly desperate, just kept talking. "There will be a meeting the day after tomorrow, with the Order. We'll try to get them all on board, we've already convinced Dorcas, they'll have to believe us..."

"Wait, *Dorcas*?"

Remus nodded vehemently. That had to be worth something, right? Dorcas, who actually had every reason to hate him, after Marlene's death. If she were here right now, she could maybe convince him...

A laugh. Sirius, one hand over his eyes, laughed. It sounded wry, painful. But it served its purpose. Remus's thoughts stopped abruptly.

"What is this?" he laughed, and Remus thought he knew the reason why he had his hand over his eyes. "What sort of circus are you running? You're fucking ridiculous." He clenched the hand in his face into a fist, pressing it against the side of his forehead. Remus now saw the tears in his eyes.

"It's such a disgrace that you carry his name, his face. It makes me sick just looking at you."

He smiled coldly, it made him look completely upset. "And now you're standing here talking your head off for some reason." His fist sank down, slightly trembling. "But whatever you're trying to accomplish with that, it's not going to work. I'm not listening to you any longer.

I've done that for far too long."

He took a step back, half turned to leave, but paused again. "So either you finally kill me now and don't make this unnecessarily complicated, or you kindly leave me alone. You've taken enough from me."

He couldn't just leave now, Remus wouldn't let that happen. His legs started moving.

"Stay away!" hissed Sirius, but Remus couldn't help himself. Before Sirius could leave, he grabbed him by the arm, holding it tight, desperate.

"Don't go, Sirius. Please, listen to me."

Sirius didn't resist the touch, just holding his own arm away from him as if he wanted to get rid of it, his face turned away.

"I know you still don't believe that I changed, that's okay. But if you still care about James, Lily and the others, please think about it again. Operation Kratía is no lie. And it could be the end of us. That's why we need your help."

Silence. Remus didn't allow himself to get his hopes up, even the fact that it made the knot around his throat loosen a little was sacrilegious.

"Are you done?" was all Sirius whispered, looking down. Remus slowly closed his eyes, feeling tears of despair gathering in them. It was all in vain.

He let go of him. Sirius's arm sank down, without any tension, and he instantly walked away. Had no more words for Remus, not even a glance.

Remus watched him go, slowly, slipping away from him. He was unable to stop it, to take even one more step, or to say a single word. What good would it have done? Sirius didn't believe him. Would never believe him again.

It was over.

***

The thought was there, very briefly. To do as Sirius had done, to not return to the hut, to just stop. It was the flooding feeling of powerlessness that made the world as a whole unbearable for a moment, that made everything pointless. Over a year of hardships, risks, murders he was no longer committed to. All for this. For the certainty that the man he loved was lost to him forever.

The thought passed again, for better or worse for Remus. He returned to Regulus. But also only because he had no other place to go. Because there was no one else, except that small handful of people who were the only ones who didn't want him dead. That was all that was left.

Regulus was waiting for him, alone. No words were needed, a small glance was enough. He took Remus by the hand, sat him down, carefully, placed himself next to him. Did not let go of his hand.

Remus soaked up the silence Regulus allowed him. Needed it to come down, not go completely nuts, push the table away and beat his fists bloody on the walls. In the old days he might have done that. But those days were over. Even if the whole world didn't want to believe him, Remus knew. He was not a monster. He was not a monster.

"I should have listened to you," Remus finally said, and Regulus took note, motionless. "I got carried away when I saw him the other day. Thought it would work out somehow. I guess after the year I've had here I just didn't realise how much I'd hurt him."

"Sirius always feels the maximum of everything. There's no middle ground. When he loves someone, he loves them with everything he's got. And when he's hurt or angry, it's just the same. And then there is no getting through to him."

He was right. Remus had seen it with James, after all, when he'd confessed to him about his relationship with Regulus. When someone hurt Sirius, especially someone he trusted, he paid them back a thousandfold. It was his own personal way of retaliating. And it threatened to tear Remus apart from the inside.

"He didn't listen to me for a second, shut down completely." Remus grimaced. "But even if he hadn't, it probably wouldn't have mattered anyway. Nothing I wanted to say made it past my lips. My head was completely blank. I couldn't have convinced anyone that way."

"It was an extraordinary situation for you too."

"He thought I wanted to kill him."

"Understandably."

"He had accepted it. He didn't want to fight back."

Regulus squeezed his hand. "He was terrified. He thinks you're Voldemort's right-hand man. Probably thought he didn't stand a chance anyway."

"That's not like him, though. Not a bit."

"No," Regulus agreed. And said nothing more.

"Any other news?", Remus forced himself to ask, simply to avoid thinking about his failure for once for a few blissful seconds.

"I spoke to James."

"What?" Regulus nodded Remus's shock aside.

"Coordinated it with Dorcas. We want to brief a few individual, critical members of the Order beforehand, so the whole place doesn't blow up in our faces if you suddenly show up there."

"So, how did it go?"

Regulus shrugged. "It wasn't easy either. But I think I had the 'resurrection bonus'. He wasn't thrilled, but he promised me he'd listen to you."

Remus felt a tiny bit of tension drain out of him. "Well, that's a start, isn't it?"

"Absolutely." Regulus looked at him thoughtfully. "So... you are still in?"

Even after your worst nightmare has come true?

Remus lowered his gaze. The things he had said to Regulus last time still stung. He didn't deserve that.

"I am." A small exhale. Regulus seemed really relieved.

"Good." He squeezed his hand. "That's good."

Remus would go through with it, for Regulus. But his heart would not be in it anymore.

His heart had stayed where it was not wanted.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: '5. März / 5 March' by Megaherz

:((

(last tag :*)

Thanks for reading!

See ya <3

Chapter 59: The Scar Does

Chapter Notes

CW Depression, Suicidal Ideation, Alcohol Abuse

Three chapters! :)) All leading up to the day of days. I hope you like them!
I wish you all a happy new year! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rain does not return back up

When the wound

No longer hurts

The scar does

When Sirius allowed himself to think of his Remus, he never thought of the big picture. He only thought about small things, over and over again, specifically. The way he had held the quill in class, the way he looked when he wasn't paying attention, the same strand of hair that had lain stubbornly on his forehead. It was memories like that that Sirius could bear.

They never lasted long, though, inevitably replaced by memories of the parasite. Then the little details from that time would come out, crawl under his skin and suck the life out of him. The crocodile tears after Marlene's death. The constant need for control, the countless excuses, that amused glint in his eyes when Sirius had brought up serious subjects. The way he had grabbed his hair, the way he had touched him, the dirty things he had whispered into his ear while fucking him. The cruel smile the moment he had been exposed, in Godric's Hollow. All of that kept coming back.

Sirius had thought he was ready to face him. To face death with his head held high. But not even that had the parasite granted him. At the

end, Sirius had been on the verge of begging him to finally do it, so that he wouldn't leave him as he was now.

But what else had he expected? The parasite wasn't there to help him. He just wanted to see him break, over and over again, until he had wrung every drop of agony out of him, until there was nothing left of him. Only then would he release him, only then.

Perhaps he had already succeeded today.

***

Bright, unbearable, white light blinded him. It sent a sharp pain through his head, making him grimace. He lay softly. The back of his hand itched, but Sirius was too indolent to scratch. He felt light, light as a feather, floating on a little cloud in nothingness.

"Sirius?" he heard. He knew the voice, but couldn't place it.

"Sirius, can you hear me?" It didn't sound insistent, just careful, cautious. Still, it pulled uncomfortably at Sirius, tugging him to the surface, forcing him to open his eyes fully, even though the light blinded him so terribly. For a moment, everything was glistening white. But then slowly everything around him began to take on colour again. It was sobering.

"Thank God," Leo whispered beside him, clinging to the side frame of the hospital bed. He looked overtired, but smiled bravely.

"What's wrong?" whispered Sirius, closing his eyes briefly every now and then because they were watering from sensory overload. "What happened?"

"You're in hospital," Leo said gently. "But everything's going to be fine. Don't worry."

"Why?" asked Sirius dopily. His head was too sluggish to remember.

Leo gently stroked his arm.

"You had alcohol poisoning."

The words echoed in his head.

"I... sorry, I just went into your flat. The door was open." Leo continued apologetically. "I was worried, you didn't come to my place as you said you would..."

"No problem," Sirius croaked, trying in vain to remember any of it.

"What happened?"

Unfortunately, Sirius remembered *that*. Everything else after that was just a collection of hazy gloom, but the very thing he had been trying to erase was still there just as before. The parasite, his insane talk, his attempts at deception. Remus's face. It had been maybe fifteen minutes. And from the looks of it, that was enough to nearly kill him.

"I met *Remus*," Sirius said matter-of-factly.

Leo's eyes widened. "Remus? Is that...?"

"Yeah. Ambushed me, so I confronted him. I guess he's still not done with his lies. He wanted to pick up right where we left off last year. So I just left."

The fact that I'm here now just doesn't quite fit the example I wanted to set.

Leo shook his head in disbelief. "This can't go on like this. As soon as you get out of the hospital, we have to..."

"Save yourself the effort, it's pointless."

This time Leo reacted differently to Sirius's refusal, unexpectedly.

"No!" he hissed, looking at him angrily. "No, Sirius, we're not just going to sit idle again now. Are you really going to wait for him to change his mind and do something to you?"

"Some things can't be stopped."

Oh, his face. The truth hurt sometimes, maybe Leo was still too sheltered to really understand that. Life had to be nice when the biggest problem was a messed up exam. Sirius envied him.

"No," Leo insisted stubbornly, trying to get his features under control. "I refuse to accept that."

"Why though?" He'd known this guy for maybe a few weeks, and even though it had done Sirius good to have been chosen as his personal pity project, he was now overdoing it a little with his caring. In truth, he probably didn't even like him.

Leo leaned forward, his face pained. "You need help, Sirius," was all he said. Sirius didn't know what exactly he was alluding to. To the fact that a psychopathic serial killer was after him, or that Sirius wasn't far from drinking himself to death?

"What I need most of all is peace and quiet," Sirius finally said, tonelessly. He was still completely wrecked, his body groaning in pain now that the detox was almost complete and nothing was washing over his discomfort.

Leo looked like he wanted to shake him.

"Please," he sounded devastated. "*Please* tell me what's wrong. Who is Remus? What happened? And why did you run?"

So many questions. Sirius was tired before he had even thought about the answer. Leo wouldn't understand any of it. And even if he did, he wouldn't believe him. It was too whacky, too convoluted, too harebrained.

He stayed quiet.

"I won't let go until you do."

Sirius clenched his fists. "How about you just find someone else to boost your karma with, huh?"

That one sat. But it only took a split second for that emotion to disappear behind Leo's defiance.

"You know I'm just trying to help."

"And why is that? What are you hoping for? That you'll eventually win me over after all? Are you waiting for your big chance to be the next one to make my life hell?"

Of course he didn't deserve that. Of course that made Sirius the biggest asshole of the century. But Leo didn't know what he was getting himself into. It was better he disappeared before it got too sinister. Before he got hurt. Before Sirius reached the bottom of the abyss.

"I know you don't mean that." Leo was no longer looking at him.

"Then how do I mean it? Are you really that slow on the uptake? When are you going to realise you're only getting on my nerves?"

Leo stood up abruptly, the stool behind him scratching loudly over the PVC-floor.

"Get a good rest Sirius," he said tonelessly. "Call me when you're feeling better." And then stomped out of the room.

Sirius looked after him, slowly closing his eyes.

It was better this way. He was better off alone.

This little glimpse of happiness had been a farce anyway.

***

Over the next few hours, a few of the muggle doctors kept coming in and giving him useless examinations, writing down phone numbers and addresses for addiction contacts and support groups, assuring him that he could leave soon. Sirius didn't give them a second glance.

He had the rest of the day to himself. It was terribly monotonous, despite the newspapers and magazines he could get from the hospital café. It all hardly interested him, all the petty gossip topics, the pointless talk about colourless celebrities, none of whom Sirius knew. It made the sobriety even more uncomfortable.

As soon as he was sure his feet would carry him long enough, he dragged himself outside, where he saw a cloudless sky for the first time in weeks. He sat down on a free bench in the hospital courtyard, leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment. What kind of a picture he had to make right now? The heir of the Blacks, once proud like a god, surrounded by countless friends? All alone, emaciated, in a Muggle hospital because he could no longer keep his shit together.

The clarity, unwelcome as it was, still made him think inevitably. About what the parasite had said. Of course, most of it had been lies, but what he had said was still somehow... strange. An attack? On the 20th of September? These were things that Sirius would be able to

refute quite easily. So why hadn't he tried harder?

There's going to be a meeting the day after tomorrow, with the Order.

He had said that, hadn't he? Sirius didn't know what day it was, but he couldn't imagine under any circumstances that there really was. The Order would never do that. Especially that he claimed *Dorcas* - Dorcas of all people – was supporting him. It was brazen.

Late in the afternoon, among old ladies and limping permanent patients, he somehow found himself in front of the telephone. He spun the dial, using the only number he knew by heart.

He was so shaky that he let go of the dial twice too soon and had to start all over again. Finally, however, he had the phone to his ear and listened for the dial tone.

"Yes?" he heard James's rushed voice on the other end.

"Hey James, it's Sirius."

"Oh Sirius? So good to hear from you," he said kindly, any rushing had disappeared. *"What's up, are you okay?"*

"I'm fine," Sirius said casually. "Listen, I'm sorry for the weird question, but is it possible that there's an Order meeting or something today or tomorrow? An unscheduled one?" He didn't manage to mention Remus, it sounded too outlandish to his own ears.

There was silence on the other end of the line for a while. Then a quiet *"Yes."* Followed by a "*How do you know about that?"*

Sirius felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

"Who called this meeting?"

That hesitation again.

"I don't think it's a good idea if we discuss it here on the phone. If you want, though, we can meet again and talk about it." He didn't sound happy about it.

Sirius stared at the stark white wall above the phone. This made no sense, no sense at all.

"Could it be that Re-"

"Look Sirius, I'm really sorry, but I have to go now. What do you say, Tuesday night? Same place like last time?"

Sirius was irritated. What was going on here?

"Er, sure. But before you hang up, could you do me a favour?"

James didn't answer immediately, not as Sirius was used to him doing with this kind of request. *"What do you need?"*

If this meeting really existed, he *needed* to know, if...

"Can you get me Dorcas's phone number, please?"

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Poems about Love', a collection of poems by Bertolt Brecht

Chapter 60: Meeting Again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A man who had not seen Mr. Keuner for a long time greeted him with the words:

„You haven't changed a bit."

„Oh!" said Mr. Keuner and paled.

They were greeted with three wands to the face. Frank, Elphias, Emmeline. Remus didn't know how Barty and Regulus next to him reacted to that, but he tried valiantly to smile them away. Because he was no longer a traitor. He was *approachable*, he was *harmless*. Hopefully convincing enough in the role, too.

"This way," Frank said gruffly, not acknowledging Remus in any way. The year did not seem to have been kind to him, his features were hard, his hair thinning, his mouth pinched. The impression was only exacerbated by his obvious unwillingness to deal with three Death Eaters and having to listen to what they had to say.

Frank and the other two Order members led Remus, Regulus and Barty down a narrow corridor into a gloomy uncomfortable room where they were met by about 15 people whose murmurs fell completely silent as they entered. Remus felt all eyes boring into him. He exhaled shakily, his eyes fixed on a bare piece of wall. He couldn't look at those faces now, even if he would have to later while speaking. *Approachable.*

They were in some abandoned hideout, one they'd had to abandon after Remus had been found out. They had had to rearrange a lot of things, fundamentally. Remus admired them for their perseverance. They had simply taken the huge pile of shards in front of them and rebuilt it. It must have taken all their strength. Maybe Remus could give some of that back to them now.

Moody was the only one in the room sitting, behind a small, square

table. He held his wand across the tabletop like a judge holding his gavel, his prosthetic leg stretched away from him, his eyes fixed solely on Remus, though a wandering dead man and the son of Barty Crouch Sr. walked beside him. They were not offered a seat, just led in front of Moody, in a procession between the other Order members. They lined them up side by side and then positioned themselves diagonally in front of them, ready to repel an attack at any moment. Remus only wondered which one. They had handed over their wands.

Moody waited until they had lined up, his indistinct gaze barely making it through his hooded lids and heavy facial furrows. The others present, the *jurors*, were also silent, waiting. Remus still didn't dare look at them. Their loathing would only throw him off.

"Didn't think you'd actually come," Moody grumbled derisively. "Couldn't believe Meadowes really wasn't pulling my leg until the last minute."

Remus didn't reply, watching Moody instead who as always didn't show what was going through his mind.

"I must admit, I would be quite interested in this story." Moody tilted his head, still fixated on Remus, only on him. "You have ten minutes to convince me. Pray that you succeed."

Ten minutes to convince the dogged, unyielding, stubborn Moody that Remus had cost a leg and a lot of good people. Hell would freeze over before Remus could do it. And yet here he was, still trying.

Though the stares burned on him like fire, Remus forced himself to look around now, searching for a very specific face. He found it, among hateful grimaces, in the corner of the room. Dorcas. She looked gloomy too, but not hostile. A tiny nod was all she gave him. But it was enough. Remus closed his eyes. Took a deep breath. And began to speak.

He had gone over it countless times with Regulus and Dorcas. As much precise information as possible in as little time as possible. No unpacking of personal, tragic stories, at least not yet. Focus only on the facts.

He seamlessly continued what Dorcas had already revealed to the Order in advance. He brought names, dates, valuable information, directly from Voldemort himself. He went into the timeline of the planned attack, the lines, the phases. The plan they had made so far to prevent this from happening. The part the Order had to play in it to

make it succeed.

Moody kept his poker face throughout, as Remus had come to expect. Every now and then, before his voice became too shaky, he paused briefly to collect himself. Then he felt Regulus beside him, even without a comforting touch. His presence crept into Remus's consciousness then, calming him, though Regulus would not be able to save him, not in any way. Still, it helped him pick up the thread again.

He had no idea how long he spoke, whether he had already cracked the ten minutes. No one interrupted him. Not when he went into even further detail, describing the reserves, the sleeper cells and their essential task. He talked until he really couldn't think of anything else to say.

"That's it," he said then, his voice strained. And then he fell silent.

Remus could wring Moody's neck for his lack of facial expression. Most of the other faces seemed petrified too.

"Alright," Moody finally said, and Remus's gaze shot back to him. "That's been a lot of information." He pulled the corners of his mouth back. "Except you still haven't answered me how this constellation came to be. And why there is one among them who has been presumed dead for two years."

Remus mentally prepared himself to answer, but Regulus himself beat him to it.

"May I answer that?" he asked cautiously. Moody hesitated and finally nodded. Remus was grateful for the pause.

Regulus was much better at that, talking. Where Remus would probably have stuttered and thought about the right wording, he went on eloquently, despite his agitation. Remus listened to him as spellbound as everyone else.

"...Finally, I realised for myself that Voldemort is no longer someone I wanted to serve. So I started working against him. One fact I found out about Voldemort in the process was that he had created..." *Horcruxes*. Remus still couldn't believe they had actually destroyed them. In disbelief, he listened to Regulus's summary, his apparent death after obtaining the medallion in the cave, the subsequent tracking down of the ring in Voldemort's birthplace, the diary in a remote Malfoy hideout, the cup in the Lestranges's dungeon, the

diadem at Hogwarts. Summarised in two minutes what they had spent two years working on. For all his eloquence, it didn't do it justice.

"...And now that we have wiped them all out, we can take the fight to Voldemort. And to do that, we need all the help we can get."

And with that, Regulus concluded as well. And again that unbearable silence returned. Remus's heart wouldn't take this much longer. It got even worse when Moody turned back to him, the hint of a mocking smile on his lips.

"So what you're trying to sell us is that *you*, Voldemort's right-hand man, have had a very sudden change of heart after everything that's happened?"

"No," Remus said with all the confidence he could muster. "Not a sudden change of heart. It was a long process over many months." He had to express it now, somehow, and he had to do it better than he had with Sirius.

"I was kidnapped by Voldemort in February 1979, you all remember that." He looked piercingly at Moody. "Voldemort brainwashed me. He completely wiped me out, my memories, everything. It was horrible."

Breathe.

"And yes, at first I did serve Voldemort. But then I realized that the old Remus was still inside me." He recounted Regulus's potion that was meant to bring back memories and had brought back so much more in the process. Told of his true intentions behind the attack in Godric's Hollow, and all that had gone wrong.

"I don't know exactly who I am myself. How much has come back, how much is still missing. But I do know that I am no longer a follower of Voldemort. And that I am terribly sorry for what I have done, for all it's worth..."

He took another shaky breath, felt the urge to turn around to avoid the gazes. These people meant something to him, every single one of them, even though he had barely got to know them after the brainwashing. But the vague memories he had got back over the years and the feeling he associated with them was enough. They were wonderful people. And that they despised him that much, was not unexpected, but still hard to bear.

"I need to think, we need to think," Moody said, pointing to a narrow

door opposite the one to the hallway. "You will have no part in this. Until we've discussed it, you'll wait in the next room."

It took Remus a while for the words to get through to him and he felt Regulus pulling him along in the meantime, leading him like a guide dog to the door. A small part of him feared finding infinite blackness behind the door, but he pushed the nightmarish memory aside and pushed his way into the small, barren room that didn't leave much brightness when Barty closed the door behind them. Immediately, a silencing spell settled on them from outside, letting them hear nothing of what was being discussed in the other room.

Remus was actually fine with that. He needed time to breathe.

Regulus grabbed his arm excitedly. "That really didn't go badly! You were really good!"

Barty agreed. "I think a few might believe us about Voldemort. At least they didn't look like they wanted to wring your neck at the end."

"A few did, though," Regulus pointed out, and it stung Remus. "But I think they'll make a joint decision. Either all of them or none of them. They're too close-knit for anything else."

"What Moody says will be decisive..." muttered Remus, not even wanting to think about it. Of course, it was primarily about helping against Voldemort, but now that he had already poured his whole heart out and told his story, he almost wanted more. He wanted to know where he stood, if all the efforts to redeem himself had had any meaning at all.

Without Sirius, they didn't anyway.

"It will," Regulus said again, though he didn't sound convinced. Remus was grateful for it anyway.

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The wait was excruciating. There was no window in the stuffy, cramped room, so they didn't have even a rudimentary sense of how much time was passing. It felt like days, like a thousand little deaths.

At some point, when all three of them had already sat down next to each other against the wall and were keeping tense silence, the door opened again. With it, the silencing spell fell and Remus heard agitated voices from the next room. Remus tried to block them out, concentrating only on bracing himself against the wall and getting safely to his shaky feet. It wasn't until he started moving that he noticed who had opened the door. James.

"We're done," James said, his gaze fixed stubbornly past Remus. Remus couldn't look away. His glasses were just as full of fingerprints, his hair just as untamed, his posture just as bad. Only his eternal, slightly crooked smile was missing. Wistfulness shot through Remus so violently that he wanted to double over. There was so much he wanted to say to him, so much to apologise for, to make amends for. He missed him so much it hurt.

James had to feel his gaze, just had to, as much emphasis as Remus put on it. But he didn't return it, firmly, decisively. And Remus knew where he was with him. What else had he expected? As if Sirius's best friend would just forgive him for all that. As if a frantically extruded apology was enough.

Remus lowered his head, though he tried to retain one last bit of pride as he returned to the room. Awaiting his judgement.

Like last time, everyone fell silent as soon as they saw him. Remus, followed by his two companions took his old place, in front of Moody, who was still sitting in the same spot, his face bright red though, as if he had had a fit of rage. Inevitably Remus's gaze wandered through the crowd, he saw some faces similarly red, some had tears in their eyes, some had turned away completely. Remus's gaze once again lingered on Dorcas, but although she returned his gaze, she didn't let on whether they had decided in their favour or against.

"Well, then," Moody began, at the same moment sensing Regulus and Barty beside him, both standing close to him, much closer than they had been before. Their warmth, passing over their arms to him, was comforting.

"We've been talking for a while. About everything you told us here." He cast an undefined sideways glance at his people, then took a strained breath. "And eventually we were able to come to an agreement."

Remus closed his eyes. *Just take it easy. It's going to be alright.* He

pressed his fingernails into the heels of his hands, the pain keeping him grounded. It was the only thing, though.

"I don't want to drag it out unnecessarily." Moody wrinkled his nose and scratched at the junction between leg and prosthesis. "We find your explanations of Operation Kratía to be mostly credible. So we have decided to support you."

Euphorically, Regulus clasped Remus's wrist. A small gesture, unremarkable to outsiders, but Remus knew how it must look inside him. He wanted to leap into the air. Remus beside him didn't quite dare to admit the joy just yet.

"There will be a few limitations to that, though," Moody continued busily. "We will lend our skills to the fight, but will send you details via Meadowes at most. Only with her we will organise and plan the defence, not with you. Even though you have appeared generally credible, the mark on your arm prevents us from trusting you. Death Eaters should always be treated with caution, always, without exception. That is why it is important for some of us to make it clear that we will not fight together, but next to each other. The enemy of your enemy is your friend. And everything else will be determined afterwards."

Remus nodded curtly. It was perfectly all right. It was a first step. And maybe they would change their minds when the fight was over.

And if any of us are still alive then.

"Do you still have any points?" asked Moody in a tone that practically forbade anything other than a 'no'. They complied, shaking their heads.

"Good, then you can go now. We will discuss the next steps and Meadowes will contact you."

"Thank you," Remus murmured, lowering his gaze. The leaden tension was slow to leave him, the feeling of breathing against a hundred bar of pressure only slowly improving.

Dorcas stepped forward to walk them to the door. She did not interact with them until they were finally out of the lion's cage and shielded from view. Only then came her relieved sigh and even a thin smile.

"That was good," she said quietly.

Remus just nodded, while Barty asked curiously, "How was the discussion? Were many against it?"

"A few," Dorcas said, rather vaguely. "I'll come by tonight when we're done here. I'll tell you the details then."

"Okay."

With that Dorcas raised her hand and took her leave. A moment later she had disappeared back into the meeting room.

"I'm so glad it's over," Regulus sighed in relief as they finally left the hideout. The air had cooled, it felt infinitely comfortable on Remus's skin. He knew how Regulus meant it, but still, he couldn't help but think that *nothing* was over yet. All of this was only the beginning, as it had been for years.

"We have a chance now," Remus murmured, squeezing out all the confidence he could muster.

Regulus smiled broadly at him, happier than he'd seen him in months. "We have."

Hopefully he could keep that optimism.

Hopefully this was not all in vain.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner/Stories of Mr. Keuner' by Bertolt Brecht

Chapter 61: The One I Love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

the one i love

has told me

that he needs me

therefore

I take care of myself

look my way and

fear from every drop of rain,

that it might strike me dead

The morning of 19 September 1981 was quiet. Regulus let himself be gently led out of sleep, for the first time in ages not pulled by a taut steel cable dragging him into his study. There was nothing more to do. All the preparations had been completed. Today they only had to wait. And so Regulus could stay in bed for a bit longer.

Barty, the walking radiator, usually moved away from him unconsciously in his sleep, presumably so that neither of them would suffer a heat stroke. But when he woke up at dawn and Regulus was still there, he usually bridged the distance again, wrapping his arms around him, holding him close.

Today was no different. Although today everything was different.

"Are you awake?", Regulus breathed softly over his shoulder, where Barty had rested his chin and where his soft breath brushed him.

"Hmm," Barty sighed and gently stroked Regulus's stomach. There were two answers in there at once: a quiet '*yes*' and a loud '*don't feel like talking*'. Regulus couldn't blame him. They had talked so much in

the last few days and weeks, bickered so much, argued so much. The desire for silence was understandable.

Gently, he turned, smiled at Barty, who blinked at him with tired eyes, and kissed him. Barty could get into that, as expected. He couldn't ever get enough of it.

This was Regulus's little perfect world. The place he thought of when he was suffering, when he was miserable, when he wanted to feel safe. That's exactly how he would imagine it, his legs entwined with Barty's, his hands stroking his back, their lips sealed. Maybe that would get him through tomorrow.

Don't think about it.

Not now.

Not today.

They stayed in bed almost until noon, sluggish and lazy. Until, at some point, there was a knock on their door and Remus's muffled voice rang out.

"Sorry to disturb you. Just wanted to let you know Dorcas will be by soon. She may have some final points from the Order."

Regulus felt Barty's suppressed sigh against his neck and stroked his hair soothingly.

"Thanks Remus, coming right up."

"I thought we had peace today," Barty muttered before reluctantly letting go of Regulus and sinking back into the pillow. "I really can't take this anymore."

"Today's the last day," Regulus tried to cheer him up, though he could hardly muster any motivation himself.

"Yeah, maybe the last day of our lives too," Barty grumbled. "And I don't want to waste it."

"I'm sure it won't be long." Regulus swung his legs out of bed and sat up, circling his tense shoulders. "Surely just recapping everything again."

Barty groaned in annoyance and also straightened up, far more heavily than Regulus. They both rose, dressed and Barty took his leave for the bathroom first. Regulus, meanwhile, stepped up to the small window, opened it and let in some fresh air. It had become cooler.

A few deep breaths later, he closed the window again and trotted into the living area where Remus was tidying up. Regulus could usually tell how agitated he was by the intensity with which he went about it. Certainly a solid seven out of ten this time. And he smelled like cigarettes, another indicator.

"Everything good?" asked Regulus.

Remus smiled fleetingly at him and pushed the coffee table aside to sweep underneath. "Sure."

Regulus knew Remus wanted time for himself when he was nervous, so he just silently returned the smile. He wondered when his own nervousness would set in, when he would realise what would take place tomorrow. The end.

One way or another.

Dorcas's arrival was delayed until late afternoon, by which time Remus was scrubbing the hut clean enough to eat off the floor. Not to disturb him, Regulus and Barty had passed the time by sitting outside and talking about blissful trivia. They reminisced about Hogwarts, about all the shit they'd done and yet always got away with. He even thought about his last year at Hogwarts, even though it had been his worst. When his relationship with James had broken apart and Regulus had been given the Dark Mark, when he had still desperately convinced himself that it was the right thing. That he was on the right path. He'd gone so deep into the darkness that he'd dragged Barty along with him, nearly ruining him in the process.

"I'm glad you're not a Death Eater anymore," Regulus whispered at one point, emerging from his thoughts.

"Me too."

They sat on their tree stump, both astride it this time, so they could look each other in the eye. Barty had taken his hand.

"I should never have dragged you into this. It could have ended

badly."

"It would have ended badly either way," Barty objected. "By that time my father had already been unbearable. I was so aggressive all the time, I would have done some shit either way. And so at least I still had you and Evan. At least in the beginning."

"But it's also what they do to your head there. All that bullshit about purity of blood and stuff... It makes you go crazy." It had hurt when Regulus had seen how into it Barty had been.

"True. But I never really believed it. I just parroted it to fit in. That's how it usually works, isn't it?"

Regulus squeezed his hand.

"I'm afraid to face Evan tomorrow." He didn't like saying the name. Another reminder of his failure.

"So am I. But we should look for him anyway. And if we find him, put a shock curse on him. If he's no longer a threat, maybe they won't kill him. And he won't kill anyone."

"He'll still go to Azkaban."

"And we won't?" asked Barty with a laugh, and Regulus's stomach tightened uncomfortably.

"We trying to save the entire Ministry's ass. Saving possibly thousands of lives."

Barty looked at him like a naïve child. "We still both have done so much shit, Reg. That's going to come out eventually. And you saw the way the Order reacted to us. We're still scum to them."

"I'm not going to Azkaban," Regulus said firmly, looking to the side. "And neither are you. They can't do that. Not after all we've sacrificed."

Barty hesitated with his answer.

"Don't worry your head about it now. We'll find a solution."

Maybe tomorrow we won't have that problem at all.

Regulus was not happy with this, but he did not pursue the issue. Not today. Today there was only room for beautiful things.

Dorcas appeared half an hour later, a thoughtful face on. Regulus and Barty returned to the hut with her.

"All good?" asked Dorcas, pushing the door open.

"Yeah. We're making the best of it."

"Good."

They entered. At the same moment Remus stepped out of the bathroom, a little dishevelled and out of sorts.

"What time do you have to leave later?" Dorcas asked, not greeting him.

"Last meeting is at 9pm at Grimmauld Place," Remus muttered, glancing at the clock. He only had a few hours until he had to leave.

"Thought so. Let's sit down one last time, then." That didn't sound like a strategic meeting. More like... a casual round?

"All right", picked Regulus up, hesitantly. "Should I get something to drink?"

"If you have something," Dorcas said casually and sat down in the armchair.

Regulus shared a fleeting look with Barty before he replied, just as casually, "Sure. Beer?"

"Sounds good."

Without further wondering, Regulus went to the fridge and took out four beers, giving them out to the others. This time even Remus accepted one, even though he was usually very reluctant.

"Any final points from the Order?" asked Remus, opening his beer.

"Nope," Dorcas said casually. "They've *finally* realised that our plan, such as it was, is best."

"That's good", Regulus mumbled, just so that there would be no silence between them.

"So strange, just sitting here, waiting." Remus seemed to be doing the

same thing.

Dorcas looked at him thoughtfully before she took a sip. "Just try to get some more rest today. We all have to be in position by 5am tomorrow."

Each of them would be deployed somewhere else. Dorcas, as the head of the plan, would coordinate, from a distance, along with Doge, who was not a good fighter with his stiff knee. Regulus was part of the unit that went into hiding in the ministry before the attack, taking out the sleeper cells before they could do any damage. Barty would guard the rear entrance, focusing on potential following forces. And Remus would arrive with the enemy. They would each be on their own, in their own way.

The thought of that, wasn't very encouraging, so Regulus followed a whim and lit the fireplace that had been out for the summer. The warm light immediately made it a little better.

"By the way," Dorcas said, her eyes fixed on the fire. "I had a feeling like some people in the Order are starting to trust you."

"Really?"

Dorcas shrugged. "When it came to assigning you to your posts, very few had a problem with you being in their group."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Remus said, smiling, though Regulus could see he wasn't really behind it. Regulus realized once more he had to do something about the situation with Sirius once the fight was over. He couldn't leave Remus alone with this any longer.

They spoke a few more words, innocuous, easy to digest. So long, in fact, that Remus finally couldn't wait any longer before he changed, getting ready for his meeting, his shoulders slumped, his gaze dull.

"You'll be fine," Regulus murmured, hugging him. He would stay the night in Grimmauld Place, on Voldemort's orders. Perhaps this was the last time they would see each other.

"I hope so," Remus murmured, returning the hug firmly. "Please take care of yourself."

"Always," Regulus said, as if it had never been any other way. But tomorrow, for the first time in his life, he would probably really take care of himself.

They disengaged and Regulus put his hands on his shoulders in encouragement. Maybe it helped at least a little.

Afterwards, Remus gave Barty a fleeting hug as well, nodded in Dorcas's direction and then went on his way without much fuss. They all three watched him go until the door slammed behind him.

"He's probably got the most thankless job tomorrow," Barty muttered, leaning back in the couch.

"And the most dangerous," Dorcas added and Regulus could only nod.

"I really hope it all works out."

"There's something else I need to tell you," Dorcas leaned forward in her armchair. The change in tone caught Regulus's attention.

"I didn't want Remus to hear. If everything goes according to plan, he won't notice any of this either."

"Notice what?" Regulus didn't like her tone at all.

"It's about Sirius. He called me a few days ago."

"What did he say?" Regulus felt his pulse skyrocket.

"He wanted to know what was going on, and he *really* got on my nerves with it. I had to tell him."

"And?"

Dorcas took a deep breath. "Well, he didn't believe me about Remus being on our side, but - after some excessive shouting - he eventually did believe what I told him about Voldemort's attack. And by the end he insisted on helping."

"Excuse me?" Barty was the first to regain his speech. "What did you say?"

Dorcas gave Barty a playfully light-hearted pat on the back, even though her facial expression did not match with it. "Congratulations. There's a last-minute personnel addition in your group tomorrow."

Regulus shook his head. "You're joking, right? Sirius has given up magic. Why is he so desperate to join the fight? Surely he knows Remus will be there too?"

"You're his brother, aren't you?" asked Dorcas bluntly. "So you should know him well enough. You should know how much he wants to see Voldemort dead. He has even more reason for it than you have."

Regulus fell silent.

"Believe me, I've tried to dissuade him, I really did. But no chance. He's so terribly stubborn."

Regulus felt the need to slap his hand to his forehead. That was the cherry on top of the cake.

"At least I minimised his risk," Dorcas continued. "I placed him as far away from Remus as possible so they wouldn't run into each other. And the back entrance is the least dangerous. I'm sure he'll get around there."

Regulus hoped she was right. Because they had enough to deal with when they had to fight over 40 Death Eaters, Regulus didn't want to have to look after his brother and save him from a fool's death.

Because if Regulus was honest with himself, he knew full well that he would.

He couldn't justify anything else to himself or Remus.

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The morning of 20 September 1981 was not quiet.

It sounded like suffering, pain and smelled like blood and death. The stench was already in Regulus's nose when he opened his eyes, far too early, jolted from a restless sleep by the alarm clock. And it stayed. Until after the short, fearful, longing goodbye to Barty, until through the dark corridors of the Ministry, past first, unsuspecting employees, towards those who were less unsuspecting. Who were just waiting for their signal, just as Regulus did.

The stench stayed. And Regulus knew it would not remain imagination for much longer.

Chapter End Notes

Quote from 'Gedichte über die Liebe / Poems about Love', a collection of Poems by Bertolt Brecht

Can you feel it? The end? It’s getting closer. I’m not ready… But who ever is?

See ya.

Chapter 62: Dance With The Devil

Chapter Notes

CW Minor Character Death, Violence, Injuries, Blood, Mental Distress

Keep the 'Unreliable Narrator' tag in mind this time :* (also the reminder: happy ending and no major character death in this fic!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Say goodbye

As we dance with the devil tonight

Don't you dare look at him in the eye

As we dance with the devil tonight

Until a week ago, Lily had not even known that the Ministry of Magic had a back entrance. Inconspicuous behind an uncomfortable-looking seating area, beyond the entrance hall, in a sprawling side corridor where one would have guessed a few offices at most. It was meant for emergencies, when something went wrong, when someone important needed to get out quickly and unseen. Now they were trying to prevent the opposite.

They had formed two small groups to guard the back entrance. Had set up two barricades, with chairs, tables, flower pots, anything they could find. One on the left side of the corridor, with six people overlooking it, one on the right, a little further back, a potential fallback position and a dispersal of forces. Behind this cover were only three people: Lily, an older Auror whose name she didn't know, and Sirius.

He was wearing old clothes, Lily knew them from the past. A pair of tattered jeans, a dark t-shirt, plainer than anyone was used to from him. He had gotten thinner, so the clothes didn't even fit him

anymore. His arms were tattooed, black, rune-like patterns snaking up under the sleeves of his shirt. His hair was longer, lacking some of its silky sheen. His face had something doll-like, emotionless about it, seemed only vaguely familiar to her. He carried a wand that was not his.

"Are you all right?", Lily asked him uncertainly, surely for the fourth time since they had stood here behind the barricade waiting for something to happen. The Auror had turned away from them, taken a seat on a remaining chair and closed his eyes. He was not sleeping, he was resting. That was a difference that Lily knew by now. Still, it made her feel more undisturbed.

"Sure, everything's great," Sirius said for the fourth time as well, in his carrying, light-hearted tone. This time, however, Lily didn't leave it at that.

"Must be pretty overwhelming, right? So after a year without magic? I could understand if you'd rather join Dorcas and Doge at the Coordination Centre after all. It's a bit quieter there."

"I know what I'm doing," Sirius said firmly, giving her a fleeting but stern look. Dorcas had probably told him the same thing a hundred times.

"I know, I know." She raised her hands placatingly. "And we all know you've really got it, too. But I mean, it could be that..."

"What? It could be that I run into *Remus*?" Sirius's grey eyes flashed dangerously. "I know that. And I don't give a shit. I'm here solely for Voldemort."

Lily tried not to look too frustrated. She didn't believe him, not for a second. But Remus was fortunately also deployed at the enemy's main focus in the entrance hall, so the likelihood of actually running into him was very slim. Dorcas had been thinking along.

Lily tried with difficulty to swallow her tension and worry. After all, she was still here. If it really came to a fight here as well, she could protect him. It was all right.

"Alpha to all, over." Dorcas's voice came out of Lily's pocket, a little distorted. She fished for the old-fashioned radio, listening as the other groups reported in.

"Bravo 1 listening."

"Bravo 2 listening."

Bravo 3, right by the sleeper cells, only pressed the talk button twice to suggest they were listening.

Afterwards, Lily saw Emmeline in the cover in front of them holding up her radio:

"Charlie 1 listening."

Lily pressed the talk button and said, "Charlie 2 is listening."

With that, everyone addressed was through. Five groups, three big ones, around the entrance, two small ones in the back. They were using Muggle communication technology because the Death Eaters didn't know how to intercept it. It was a bit more cumbersome, but safe.

"This is Alpha, Lima just sent me the first signal. Estimated arrival of first enemy forces, 30 minutes. Silent evacuation of the Ministry almost complete. Bravo 3, stand by. Access in 5. The rest will remain in position until enemy contact, over."

"Bravo 1, Roger."

"Bravo 2, Roger."

Two clicks.

"Charlie 1, Roger."

"Charlie 2 Roger." Lily looked to Sirius and the Auror to see if they had been listening in, and they both nodded at her. The Auror still with his eyes closed.

"Keep your feet still, I'll be in touch. Out." With that Dorcas ended the radio call and Lily listened to the silence for a moment before she repacked the radio.

"So it's beginning," Lily noted, already frightened out of her mind for James. He was Bravo 2, and it drove Lily crazy that she couldn't be with him. But she had had no say in the matter, unfortunately. Others had worked out the strategy. People who hopefully knew what they were doing.

"I hope so. I don't think I can stand waiting much longer." Sirius raised his hand to prove it, demonstrating to Lily how much it was shaking.

Lily raised her own in comparison, which was quite the same.

"I hope I don't forget every single spell I learnt," she tried to say casually, but it only sounded pressed. Sirius smiled anyway.

"Ask me. I was awake all night and had to remind myself of everything. If anyone's going to forget anything, it's going to be me."

"Oh, it'll be fine," Lily smiled encouragingly and patted his upper arm. Even though she shared the exact same concerns.

Everything will be all right, she reminded herself. *You'd better pray that nothing happens to the bravo-groups, James, Peter, Mary. They're the ones you have to worry about.*

A few tense minutes later, Bravo 3 made their first verbal contact over the radio.

"Alpha, this is Bravo 3, sleeper cells have been successfully eliminated. We do not assume they were able to send out a warning. Evacuation complete, over."

"Alpha here, roger that. Well done. Then take up your positions asap."

"This is Bravo 3, roger, out."

Lily took a deep breath. That was good, very good. The first step had been taken. This was the way to go.

Sirius beside her was visibly relieved too. He wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and leaned against the wall.

"I'd like to come and see you sometime... after this today," he said, his tongue loosened by this small success. He spoke so softly that it took Lily a second to put the sounds together in her head.

"Of course! Harry wants to finally meet you properly! And I'd be super excited too."

She regretted mentioning Harry. It brought back how negligent it was that she and James were both fighting while he slumbered in a safe place and might never see them again. It had been the hardest decision she had ever made. But she would have never forgiven herself if she hadn't join the battle today, and didn't give it everything she had. Here, her family was fighting. So she was fighting too.

"I'm sorry I just took off like that," Sirius brought her out of her guilty

thoughts. "I...wasn't quite myself. I'm probably still not."

"I understand that." She was glad he was back at all. She could overlook a year of radio silence.

She was about to hint at a cautious hug when there was a crack in her radio. Something had happened.

She pressed the talk button and was about to ask when suddenly a huge explosion shook the entire corridor. The barricades rattled and vibrated, Sirius reflexively covered his ears, Lily almost lost her balance. Shocked, she lowered the radio and stared at Emmeline by the other barricade, who looked equally horrified. The explosion had come from the Entrance Hall, bigger and more violent than anything they had imagined.

Voldemort was here.

***

When Voldemort was confident of victory, he was almost loving. Treated his subordinates as if they were actually part of his family, his real brothers and sisters, as if they meant the world to him.

Remus had once wanted nothing more than that, had fought for every smile, every proud nod. Now it made him sick. The way Voldemort raised his hands solemnly, in front of his dozens of hooded henchmen, and received their cheers, made horror well up inside him. Of course, he cheered along anyway. For the last time.

Timing was everything in this matter. Remus had gone over it with Dorcas for hours. They had come to the conclusion that Remus would be most useful if he stayed with the enemy as long as he could. Passing on information, directing the attack in a certain direction, delaying, being loud, making lots of little mistakes. Remus would present the show of his life. And then, then the great moment would come. Freedom, renunciation, from the true, actual rat's nest.

"My brothers and sisters," Voldemort finished his solemn speech, almost having to shout, so fired up were the others already. "Are you

ready for the most important battle of your lives?"

The shouting was deafening. Remus half-heartedly bawled along, meanwhile sending Dorcas the agreed signal over the radio. A few more minutes. Then, chaos, fear, pain, death. And perhaps redemption. A hope Remus clung to. Even if his heart sank at the sight of how many followers Voldemort had scraped together. They were outnumbered. It was going to be bad.

"Then let us be on our way!" announced Voldemort, conjuring up the dark clouds of smoke that would envelop them all, take them all to their designated destination. Remus took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The explosion was Voldemort's greeting. A small '*Here I am*' with which he completely destroyed the fountain in the centre of the hall and the statues on it, not a second after he and his numerous followers had come through the fireplaces. It also knocked Remus completely off his feet, although he had already expected something like that. Reminded him how motivated, how powerful Voldemort was.

For a moment, everything was *great*. The statues's limbs flew through the air, chunks of rock rolled across the dark floor. But when the dust settled and silence instead of panicked screams ensued, Voldemort realised for the first time that something was wrong. Silence meant that there was no one there, no busy Ministry officials, no visitors, no tourists. It was quiet. And among the billowing smoke, dressed in his best robes, stood Alastor Moody, a venomous smile of joyful anticipation on his lips.

"Surprise," he said, calmly. And then the Order attacked.

Remus immediately dived to the side so that none of the shock spells hit him. As agreed, he set fire to his hood with an inconspicuous spell, only to throw it off shortly afterwards, along with his mask, cursing loudly. Thus he escaped the problem altogether.

Fighting had broken out beside him, still impersonal, from a distance. Remus tried to get an overview from the sidelines. The Order had set up numerous barricades, some apparently still unoccupied, as fallback positions. Behind the foremost, flickering slightly through the protective shields, Remus saw familiar faces flash by, Peter, Sturgis, Gideon, James. Even in those brief moments Remus could see their tension, their fear.

"Line two!" shouted Rodolphus, who had hastily taken the lead of his half-group. Remus knew it meant they were going to attack via the left flank. He quickly leaned to the side and shot a faint directional arrow in the direction he was aiming. A quick checking glance down the Death Eater rows told him that no one had noticed. From behind a barricade, however, a thumb appeared. Relieved, Remus regrouped in his squad. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the groups already shifting in the right direction. Perfect.

"*Very good*!" rumbled Voldemort throughout the hall, his voice magically amplified. He seemed to have recovered from the initial shock. "*A welcoming ceremony. How wonderful!*"

Moody whipped spell after spell at Voldemort, which he casually swatted away, like pesky flies.

"I hope you have said a proper farewell to your loved ones. For none of you will survive this day."

He raised his hands, stretching them wide above him as if to touch the ceiling. He bellowed something, words Remus had never heard before, words that went right through him. And then everything went dark.

***

If there was a hell, James imagined it like this. Darkness, clouds of smoke that wrapped themselves around him so heavily that he thought he might suffocate. Gloomy, ominous echoes that the smoke drove into his ears. Fear-filled screams, of familiar voices. James wanted to cover his ears.

"Lumos!" shouted Gideon, and a powerful ball of light flew into the air. The light only made it a few feet through the unnatural black smoke, but it was enough for James to get a view of his group again.

"Everyone still here?" he called out as he tried to spot Death Eaters. The attacks had died down with the onset of darkness.

"Yes, no casualties," Sturgis reported after connecting with the second half-group. Bravo 2 was twelve in all, divided into two half-groups, spread across two barricades, right next to each other. Behind the other barricade, just out of James's field of vision, Reg had to be

somewhere.

"What's he planning?" muttered James, so that only Sturgis heard. Still no attacks came, nothing but darkness and the confused echo of voices.

"No idea," the latter hissed back, peering over the barricade as well, his face contorted in strain. "Got no sight of Lima now."

"Hm." The other group's change of position to the left flank had taken place; they were prepared for an attack over that side. But if the enemy had now changed their strategy again, they would possibly realize too late....

"COVER!" someone yelled and James just managed to duck before everything around him exploded. A blast wave hit them with full force, throwing James backwards as the barricade in front of him shattered and its components turned into deadly projectiles.

Just before he hit the ground, one of these projectiles, a broken chair leg, struck him on the right elbow and an excruciating pain shot through him. He wanted to cry out, but the impact squeezed all the air out of his lungs. It beeped in his ears, almost deafening him, making all the noise around him shrink to an indefinable hum. His glasses were gone, everything was a blur. He still realised that the clouds of smoke had disappeared. They had served their purpose.

"*mes*-!" Shouted someone. But he was unable to get up, even moving seemed impossible. His whole body ached, his elbow most of all. It was broken.

"*James! Get away, get away!*" The voice was so shrill, it was the only thing that got through to him. At the same moment he began to see lights above him, green, red, some shooting past him only inches away. Only slowly, as the beeping in his ears began to subside and his mind returned, did he realise what was happening.

"Stop, Mary, you can't do that! This is suicide!" another voice shouted.

"Let go of me!"

James took a shaky breath, realising that he was in the middle of the line of fire, that the barricade in front of him no longer existed. Yet he didn't dare move either. Any movement could be his last.

Where was the rest of his half-group? Were they injured as well? Were

they...?

A screech. A clatter, stunned shouts.

The flashes above James suddenly stopped. Irritated, he raised his head, racked by dizziness. Dimly he recognised someone coming towards him from the enemy side, sprinting even. Before he could react, the figure was already on him, yanking him up, dragging him roughly with them. James hardly knew what hit him, felt his legs dragging over boulders and his trousers tearing.

Then suddenly there was a familiar face in front of him. And careful hands leaning him against something, an overturned table, part of another barricade.

"James, oh thank God," he heard Mary say, and she was so close to him he could see her sharply.

"What happened?" mumbled James, still struggling with dizziness. Mary ducked quickly as a curse shot over her and then smiled painfully at him.

"Voldemort blew your barricade away. The protection spells didn't stand a chance. You were hit full on. But Remus..." hesitantly she looked next to James, who only now realised Remus had crouched down beside him. "He saved you."

Remus shook his head wearily before James could say anything. "I hope I didn't seal our doom with that."

"I'm sure you didn't," Mary said, running her wand over James's broken elbow. The pain subsided, though the arm remained useless. James stared at Remus the whole time he was catching his breath.

"You saved me," he whispered, but Remus only waved it off.

"The fight has only just begun. And I got busted for it."

James couldn't believe it.

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome." Remus took a deep breath before standing up and resuming the fight, now on the other side. James watched him do it with wide eyes.

***

James was alive.

Sturgis, Gideon and the three aurors of his half-group were not.

War was a cruel merchant.

Regulus tried not to look at them, the corpses lying just a few feet from his barricade. He shot spell after spell at the Death Eaters, roaring triumphantly when he hit one of them as if it were his personal reckoning. He didn't know if any of his family had noticed him yet, but he didn't care. They should feel free to look him in the eye as he finished them off. Revenge for all they had done to him.

It seemed to be an even fight, although a half-group of them had been wiped out. On the quick, Regulus already saw two Death Eaters lying on the ground and their formation didn't seem to be quite working so far either. Voldemort was keeping in the background, had even turned away from the fight, heads together with another masked Death Eater. Was he hatching something? Or was he still trying to process that his faithful Remus, his favourite pet, had switched sides?

Regulus had only been able to catch a glimpse of Voldemort's face while Remus had dragged James away, but it had been enough. That bewilderment, that brief derailment of the always perfect features. It had been beautiful. Now, if only he knew that none of his Horcruxes existed anymore... that would be the cherry on top. Regulus prayed to be the one to bring him this happy news at the moment of his death.

As the battle progressed, Regulus listened next to him to the radio messages his half-group leader was exchanging with Dorcas. He was informing her about the dead, about the fact that they had everything under control again. Dorcas took note, didn't let the formation change, didn't reply much more like. "*Hang in there*", but even that she said so forcefully that it had a motivating effect.

Of course, they also had a reserve in case everything went down the drain, it would be foolish not to. The great Dumbledore himself. He would come when things got dicey, as he had apparently done the last time, in Godric's Hollow.

Reserves were always to be formed, in any battle, anyone who dealt with war knew that. But the way Dumbledore staged himself every

time... it only gave Regulus the impression that he was trying to put himself in the limelight. The great saviour in time of need. The light on the horizon. Regulus knew how good he was, how much he could achieve if he really wanted to. But still it left a strange taste on his tongue.

Regulus continued to scout the enemy formation, chose his new target, and finally decided on Avery. He was already standing in a relieving position, something seemed to be wrong with his leg. It wouldn't take much, then Regulus could take him out. And it would be a pleasure for him.

He had just fired a shock spell at him when he saw out of the corner of his eye that Voldemort was turning around again. He seemed different, more lively. Not a good sign.

"Look, I think...," Regulus began, but the words stuck in his throat as once more darkness enveloped them. He cursed.

"Heads down!" shouted Arthur Weasley first, and Regulus complied as best he could. For the second time in a short time, clouds of smoke billowed unnaturally fast through their ranks, taking away their vision and ability to fight. Regulus felt fear rising within him. Was it their barricade this time?

"Stay alert," Arthur continued to hiss, and Regulus hardly dared to move for fear that he might miss something. These sudden transitions between fighting and fearful uncertainty gnawed at Regulus's nerves, especially after seeing how many lives the last darkness had cost. But he couldn't panic now.

So he waited. And waited. And waited. He didn't know if it was his nerves playing tricks on him, or if there really was an unusual amount of time passing. Cautiously, clutching his wand tightly, he dared a glance at his group, all five of them crouched beside him like the ultimate heap of misery, tense to the utmost, deep furrows of fear on their faces. Cautiously, Regulus leaned towards Arthur.

"What's going on here? Is something else happening?" he asked quietly. Arthur looked as uncertain as Regulus felt.

"I don't know. Maybe they're waiting for us to make a mistake."

Possibly. Regulus leaned back again, peering cautiously over the barricade, recognising nothing but blackness. And then he continued to wait.

If this was a new attrition tactic from Voldemort, it was working. At some point Regulus heard the other groups growing impatient, using little spells to try and dispel the smoke, but nothing helped.

After a few more unbearable minutes, however, something happened. Surprisingly unspectacular, this time. A light appeared, on the enemy's side, starting small, spreading further, like a Patronus between a cluster of Dementors. It blinded Regulus, but he persisted, trying to see what was going on, who had sent the light. The answer was sobering: Rodolphus Lestrange. Unusually pompous, he appeared, standing on a rock broken out of the ceiling, smiling triumphantly as he sent the smoke back into nothingness.

Regulus frowned. What the hell was all this fuss about?

"Don't hesitate," Arthur said warningly. He was right. In a moment the fight would start again, in a moment the madness would continue. Regulus raised his wand, the first curse already on his lips, as the unearthly light around Rodolphus suddenly went out. And what Regulus saw then made him pause in horror.

Nothing.

There was nothing at all. Rodolphus was completely alone. And seemed supremely content to be so.

"What the..." Regulus looked again at Arthur, who himself did not know what to say.

"Where is everyone?"

A dull, heavy rumbling sounded, not very loud, but all the more sinister for it. Regulus's whole group began to look around, like a dog that had caught scent.

Another rumble, a crash, cries of pain. A realisation, and with it horror, spread through Regulus. Remus, a few feet behind him, hidden among mountains of furniture, gave shape to this vague foreboding with a bellowing roar.

"Back entrance!"

And for a second, the world stopped.

***

As it turned out, Sirius had not forgotten a single spell. They had stayed, somewhere in the back of his mind, just waiting to be used. It was comforting to know that he could always be sure of them.

And yet, in the face of over thirty Death Eaters blasting their way through the back door, mowing everything down within seconds, it still wasn't enough.

***

Keep calm, Remus admonished himself adamantly. *Keep calm, don't panic*.

It didn't work. Because Remus knew that *this* was the very thing he had been supposed to prevent from happening. *This* was why he was supposed to fight on the side of the enemy. To warn the Order of any change in strategy. To prevent an ambush.

To save lives.

Shifting focus. A very professional word for the chaos they were creating. Over half of them broke away from the barricades to the back, trying to avoid possible traps from Rodolphus and hidden enemies, and made their way towards the back entrance at top speed. Remus was one of them, running in the lead as fast as he could.

There were nine people at the back entrance, only nine. Remus only knew about Lily and Barty and that was bad enough. Nine guards, against so many Death Eaters? Catastrophic.

They ran and ran, Remus, despite his focus on the end of the hall, noticing Regulus only a few paces beside him, panting with exertion as well. He probably felt just as responsible for all that was happening today as he did.

A few agonising minutes later, they finally turned into the right

corridor, greeted by overwhelming noise and chaos. Remus had to duck away immediately as a Death Curse rushed at him that had probably been meant for someone else. He stretched a makeshift shield in front of himself and the other arrivals and tried to get an idea of the situation.

The barricades were scattered, parts were burning, others were spread along the entire length of the corridor. Some lifeless bodies lay on the ground, covered in blood. Others were spread out behind the shelters that had remained. They had their backs turned to them, some barely visible under their protective shields. They did not seem to realise that support had arrived.

The Death Eaters were already on the move. They had crossed almost halfway down the wide corridor, slowly pushing back what was left of the Charlie groups. Remus heard wild shouting behind him, from the group leaders.

"Get into position!" they yelled, and Remus and the others complied. They used whatever cover they could find, or worked spells where necessary, before they began to put a stop to the approaching enemy. Some of them had taken off their Death Eater masks by now in favour of better vision, so Remus could tell who he was dealing with. They were all familiar faces who, as soon as they saw him in the ranks of the enemy, looked at him with hatred and despair and seemed to have it in for him in particular. He had no problem with that. Better him than anyone else.

But the ratios had reversed, it was obvious.

Of course, the corridor had a channelling effect, which was a disadvantage for an attacking enemy. But their own forces lacked orientation, protection, formation. And the Death Eaters knew that.

The long range battle was over. The Death Eaters now came so close that various duels broke out, some silent, others with loud, agonising roars. Amidst the chaos, Remus saw Lily's fiery red hair flash as she gave her all in battle against Walden Macnair. A few steps away, Remus saw Barty, his face covered in blood as he fought off a wave of curses and insults from Rabastan. A few chunks even resounded to Remus "Traitor bastard! You and fucking Lupin! I thought we were friends!"

A man broke through between duels, stomping in Remus's direction. His hard, angular face just as frightening as ever. This time, all the

ferocity in it was directed at Remus.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted Antonin Dolohov, without hesitation, and Remus needed all the reflex he had to jerk his arm up in time to ward off the spell. With a loud hiss, the Death Curse bounced off him and Remus hardly realised at that moment how narrowly he had escaped death. Without giving it a second thought, he hurled the Death Curse back, which Dolohov blocked much more effortlessly. For a second they both paused, staring at each other, and Dolohov smirked slyly, unfazed by the curses that shot past him on both sides, products of the duels around them.

"I knew there was something wrong with you from the start," he hissed, his accent lending an eerie edge to his words. "Time to bring you to your rightful punishment."

"Looking forward to it," Remus replied mockingly, opening fire once more.

It was like a dance, in a way. Only Remus was much better at this than at the classical version. Here, every step, every movement was spot on. It required the utmost concentration, because every step, every blink of an eye could be the last. Every mistake could mean the end.

Tormented screams were the background music of their dance, the crackling of the flames the beat. Remus blanked it out almost entirely, completely in his element, totally fixated on Dolohov's steps. He was a master killer, precise, fast, stoic. The ruthless killing machine Remus had never quite been, no matter how hard he had tried.

But he was not without weaknesses either. He was very good at hiding it, but Remus recognised it anyway. His right arm, the very one that wielded the wand. Which had been half-etched away by the poor apothecary Remus had murdered. Regulus had healed it well, but the way Dolohov held it, the way he twisted it oddly when Remus came too close to his right side... He still had to be giving him trouble.

Remus tested the waters, putting himself in motion more, trying to get into Dolohov's flank every now and then when he was busy fighting off one of Remus's curses. Most of the time he succeeded without a problem.

Until he didn't.

In the end, it was a small, inconspicuous rock, a minor by-product of

some explosion, lying there, waiting, lurking. And on his next step to the side, Dolohov stepped on it, lost his balance for perhaps a second. That was enough for Remus.

With a quick step forward, he came to Dolohov's right side, raised his wand and fired the Death Curse. He saw Dolohov regain his balance, try to raise his arm, lock it strangely for a millisecond before taking up the starting position for the defensive sp....

He fell to the ground, dead. Remus came to a stop, adrenaline making his head throb, his gaze fixed on the motionless figure. The monster among the Death Eaters, the ice-cold killer, dead. Remus exhaled shakily.

The relief was only granted to him for a few seconds. For the battle punished every little inattention, every little moment of weakness. Mercilessly.

Something caught Remus just above the waist, a curse. He winced violently, stifled a pained cry and pressed his hands to the spot. He felt warm blood oozing out, but first followed his survival instinct and looked for a makeshift cover before examining it more closely.

He found cover behind a half-destroyed office desk, next to which lay three corpses. Not a place Remus wanted to linger in for long, but he had no choice.

He lifted his shirt and cursed when he saw how profusely the wound was bleeding. He knew his body, knew every kind of injury, what it entailed, what it meant for him. This was not good, not good at all.

He sat down carefully, rummaged in his pocket for a bandage. He didn't have a compression bandage with him, but he did have a gauze bandage and a clean cloth. That would have to do. He took a deep breath, feeling the pain threatening to cloud his senses. The Death Eaters around him all seemed to be busy, but if even one saw him in this position, his hour had come. He had to be quick.

He pressed the cloth onto the wound and hastily began to tie the gauze bandage around his torso. It was nerve-wracking, but Remus struggled through, already aware of the rapid blood loss taking a toll on him.

While he was in the process of tying the bandage, he let his gaze wander, wary, cautious. Despite knowing better, his gaze fell on the corpses next to him. The first two were Death Eaters, one still masked,

the second was Mulciber, that fool.

The third, the last, was not a Death Eater. Motionless, covered in blood, with eyes wide open, lay-

Remus's breathing came to a sudden halt. For a moment, his mind simply refused to process what he was seeing. It tried to protect Remus, to preserve his life, his sanity. But the truth still drilled through mercilessly, drilled through his head and through his *heart*.

Motionless, covered in blood, with eyes wide open, lay Sirius Black.

Suddenly it was as if Remus was back in the Lestranges's cellar, back in the darkness, trapped in his worst nightmare. Only he knew better, this time. Even though the life was already fleeing from his body and the injury was slowing down his thoughts, he knew at that moment that this was no nightmare, no mirage. This was real. For some reason, Sirius was here. He was here, had changed his mind, had fought with them.

Had lost.

There it was. The gates of hell, the end of everything, the all-encompassing madness. Everything lay there, before him, lifeless. The battle faded away, dissolved into nothingness, no longer mattered.

Completely befuddled, he crawled out of cover, towards him. Pulled him closer, with more strength than he had ever had. His body cried out, his bandage bled through, his head was spinning. It was completely meaningless. He pulled Sirius's rigid body towards him, laid his head in his lap and stroked the blood-soaked hair from his face.

He didn't know why he was there, why he had changed his mind after all, and why no one had told him. But did it matter? Did the journey still matter when you already knew the end? Remus looked down at Sirius, at his empty eyes.

"Sirius," he whispered, as if he could still hear him. "Sirius."

Screams. The Death Eaters were breaking through, the Aurors were dropping like flies.

Irrelevant.

"I love you," he whispered, tears gathering in his eyes. "I love you. I'm so sorry."

But his love had come too late, it no longer mattered. He was too late. It would be his eternal punishment.

He began to sway back and forth as his comrades desperately tried to survive. Tears dripped from his face.

He had failed. Everything was in vain. It was all over.

When Remus felt his consciousness slipping away, the last thing he did was press the lifeless body against him, so tightly that his maltreated muscles began to scream. It wasn't close enough.

Sirius was dead.

And Remus ceased to exist.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Dance With The Devil' by Breaking Benjamin

Hold on.

Chapter 63: Time Of Dying

Chapter Notes

CW Minor Character Death, Blood, Injuries, Mental Distress

Please remember: NO major character death, this fic will have a happy ending! Trust me
I'm very sorry if I scared you with the last cliffhanger! :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I will not die, I'll wait here for you

I feel alive when you're beside me

I will not die, I'll wait here for you

In my time of dying

"Dorcas, where the hell is Dumbledore?!" shouted Regulus into the radio. "The enemy has broken through, we've been pushed back almost to the Entrance Hall. We can't hold out against them any longer!"

Regulus had picked up the radio from the floor, not knowing who it was from.

"*Won't take much longer,"* she replied, sounding weary. "*Hang in there."*

Regulus would have loved to hurl abuse, but there was no time even for that. He had already struck down several Death Eaters, but they were growing back like the heads of a hydra. He didn't know where the hell Voldemort had gotten all these people from.

Voldemort himself was keeping a low profile so far, apparently. Dodging duels, even when Moody came at him several times. Was he so sure of victory this time that he didn't even want to get his hands dirty? That was not how it was meant to be. Voldemort had to fight along, had to reveal a weakness, how else were they going to kill him?

Just ten minutes later, the Death Eaters had effortlessly pushed them back into the Entrance Hall. Their side had so many casualties by now that their command structure was crumbling and their formation was only a vague memory. It was getting ugly, absolutely messy.

With much effort, some of them had managed to entrench themselves behind a rapidly built, crumbling wall. With no means of escape, no perspective. Regulus hardly dared to look around his ranks. So many were dead, so many injured, it was pure chaos. He felt leaden exhaustion in his limbs, knew that adrenaline was the only thing keeping him going.

Let's see how long that will last.

Somewhere beside him he thought he saw Barty, limping, injured, but alive. And even though it might have been his imagination, it helped him not to lose his mind completely.

He didn't know where most of the others were, how they were, whether they were still alive. It wasn't something he could be interested in at that moment. He had to function. He had to do it for all those who would otherwise have died in vain.

A blast curse almost threatened to topple the wall, but somehow it still held. Regulus and nearby Aurors worked against it with everything they had.

Regulus felt a burning growing in his chest, knew his body was signalling overexertion, that he was working with the last of his reserves. He had been in many fights before, with the Death Eaters together. But none of them compared to a full-scale battle. The human body was not made for such things.

The difference in strength became more and more obvious, the morale smaller and smaller. Regulus found himself looking for Barty and Remus, for something to cling to. But he couldn't find them, suddenly seemingly unable to find a face that was familiar. He was alone.

It took until black dots were already dancing before Regulus's eyes, until his body was shaking as if he had been dipped in ice water, until the wall was about to collapse. Only then, only then did the fucking phoenix finally arrive. Regulus could not describe the hatred that flared up inside him at that moment.

The phoenix made the enemy attacks diminish for a moment, but not disappear completely. A ball of light appeared in the air, while Voldemort's mocking voice made the ground tremble.

"*I was beginning to think you weren't coming at all, old man*."

And then Voldemort, all restraint discarded, shot out from his ranks like a bird of prey and caught Dumbledore in mid-air, robbing him of his grand entrance and abruptly extinguishing the light.

For any other wizard, this display of arrogance in the face of Voldemort would probably have ended fatally. But not for Dumbledore. He let himself be carried away by Voldemort, waited until just before impact before releasing his grip and smashing Voldemort to the ground instead.

This gesture was enough to silence even the remaining noise of battle. Everyone looked at the two of them. At Voldemort, who instantly picked himself up and moved a little away, wand raised threateningly, and at Dumbledore, who looked at Voldemort like a disappointed father at his son. Dumbledore had perfected that look.

"At last we meet again, Tom," Dumbledore said quietly. "Please excuse my delay."

"I had a great time as it was. Much of your laughable army has already passed on."

"You'll be next." And Dumbledore finally began to do his job.

The flared fight between them did not fundamentally change the balance of power. They were still outnumbered, still tired and exhausted. But that was the magic of the reserve: creating a momentum, a spark that had the potential to spill over. Motivation was an important factor. Motivation was the key sometimes.

Moody was there, somehow, still. Despite his leg, despite the new, gaping wound above his eye. An unpleasant fighter, an even more unpleasant person. But in moments like these, the one who could convert a spark.

"Stand up, don't any of you give up! We've come this far!"

As if in a sluggish old machine, the wheels set grindingly into motion. Figures cowering behind the wall, among whom Regulus had had to count himself, struggled to pick themselves up, clutched their wands

and let Moody's grating voice bring them back to the land of the living.

"Everyone relies on us, everyone believes in us! We have loved ones waiting for us, are you all going to abandon them?"

Everyone Regulus loved was here. In danger, perhaps already dead. Yet the same was true for them, yet Regulus had to pull himself together. All the hardships of the last months, years, they could not be in vain.

He straightened up. His limbs, his shoulders, his back, everything cried out. Begged him to stop, to lie down, to surrender. Regulus didn't listen.

The ultimate, final push of motivation came from Dorcas. Almost casually, she suddenly stood beside him, appearing out from nowhere. An encouraging smile on her lips.

"I couldn't stay away any longer," she whispered. And Regulus had hope again.

***

Dorcas felt she had to make up for every single sacrifice, every drop of spilt blood. Objectively, she had done nothing wrong, she had strictly followed the plan, what they had all decided on together. Still, she felt as if she had let them all down.

Dumbledore triggered something in the Order, mostly subconsciously. So Dorcas didn't complain about him being so late, or about him allowing all this suffering. She was only doing what she was here to do, what she did best: Killing Death Eaters.

It probably didn't speak well for her character that she had fun doing it. She wasn't content with lame shock spells, not after what the people she loved had been through. What she had been through. Enough was enough.

The first Dorcas killed was Alecto Carrow. A little later, her brother. They had been inattentive, already too used to fighting lethargic, hopeless zombies. They had no chance against Dorcas's nimble

movements.

These small successes, together with Moody's never-ending battle tirades, seemed to reawaken the Order's spirits. Regulus beside her was also producing attacks again, pale and shaky as he was. What willpower could do, after all.

Dumbledore and Voldemort were having the fight of their lives away from the battlefield. Lightning, flames, gusts of wind shot over their heads, quaking floors and muffled rumbling signalled that the hall was being razed more and more to the ground. Dorcas and the others were left with little choice but to focus on the Death Eaters in front of them, whose grinning grimaces finally began to fade as they realised that the Order had not yet been defeated.

The next to fall victim to Dorcas was Thorfinn Rowle, the giant. She was particularly proud of it. When he went down, it seemed to tear a real hole in the line of Death Eaters. Some of them, at least the ones without masks, contorted their faces in fright, casting uneasy glances at each other.

That's right. That's how you're about to end up too.

For Regulus in particular, their change of mood seemed to do wonders. A sparkle returned to his eyes, one she only knew from him when he was highly focused and passionate about what he was doing.

He fired a few successful shock spells at the Death Eaters before taking a quick breath behind cover and waiting for the Death Curses to sail over him. A maniacal female laughter could be heard.

"Did I just spot my dear cousin?" shrieked Bellatrix delightedly. "Has someone risen from the dead to relive the feeling of dying?"

For a tiny moment, Dorcas saw fear in Regulus's eyes, a fear that was almost as old as he was. But he wrestled it down, replaced it with a crooked smile.

"I am only here to free the world from you" he roared, looking at Dorcas. She understood without them having to exchange a word. She would help him do it.

"Then come out, you miserable little coward! Do you think for once in your sad life you can manage not to hide from everything?"

Anger flashed in his eyes, but he intercepted it with a deep breath and

looked questioningly at Dorcas before acting. She understood what was going on inside him, perhaps better than anyone else. And she nodded at him. *I've got your back. Go on.*

And Regulus rose.

***

A battle that was destined to happen. Regulus had been waiting for it for most of his miserable life. He had just never known it.

He did now. And he was ready.

It felt a little like an out-of-body experience. A mixture of overexertion, excitement, adrenaline, anticipation. It made him walk more upright than ever.

Bellatrix didn't seem to have expected him to actually answer her call. After all, he had never responded to her gloating, to her torment, always just endured everything.

Enough of that.

Several curses flew at him, from all directions, as he stepped out of cover. Dorcas dealt with them as if they were nothing more than annoying bugs. It helped Regulus focus on the essential.

"Movete!" yelled Regulus, catching Bellatrix on the wrong foot. She had braced herself for a shock or a death curse, not an invisible rope entwining her body and catapulting her to where he wanted her. It was only a few feet, but it cut her off from the other Death Eaters and made her less dangerous.

It only threw her off balance for a moment, not even faltering her smile. She was a pro at it.

"Lovely," was all she said and attacked.

It was interesting how much more than a fight this was, at least to Regulus. It was a story. A representation of everything that was, of everything that could have been. Of everything that would never be

again. For Regulus, it was more than revenge, more than smouldering retribution. It was an act of grief, an act of acceptance, a closure. Bellatrix, alongside his worthless mother, had always been representative of all that was bad in his family. Now he would hold her vicariously accountable for all the torment, all the pain as well.

He would probably have managed it even if someone had broken both his legs or plunged a knife into his back at that moment. Nothing could have stopped him, nothing at all.

He could see it in Bellatrix's face, in the end. The slight confusion, the surprise that in the end it was her pathetic little worthless cousin who was defeating her after all. That enough pent-up anger, enough hatred, enough shame could sometimes work wonders. Weakness was not permanent. Weakness was sometimes the greatest strength.

Actually, it ended far too quickly. The Queen of Torture was supposed to have another taste of her own medicine, maybe even spend a few years with Dementors in Azkaban. But in a fight like this, Regulus had to choose efficiency and protection over anything else. When he got the chance, he had to take it. And he took it.

The green of the Death Curse danced in her eyes, for a moment. Before she left life for good, she seemed full of it for a moment. No mad glint, no mischievous twinkle, just fear. For a moment she looked like she wasn't a monster, her last attempt at deception. Regulus didn't fall for it.

She landed on the ground, almost silently in the thunderous storm around her. The wand rolled out of her hand, across the stone, coming to rest just in front of Regulus. He was free.

When he understood where he was again, Regulus cast a searching glance at Dorcas, who had ensured that his little solo trip had not ended fatally for him. Just as he was about to make his way back to her, something flew over his head, a body. Irritated, Regulus turned and followed it with his gaze, seeing it snap to the ground a few feet from him, splitting the stone floor beneath him. It was Voldemort.

"Not bad, old man!" he screeched, barely having landed.

He jumped up immediately, seemingly unhurt from the impact, and awaited Dumbledore, who came crashing in only seconds later and proceeded to bombard him with spells. Voldemort fought them off

laughing loudly, seeming to have time in his fighting zeal even to notice Regulus, who had tried in vain to escape unnoticed.

"Regulus Black!" he shouted, a mixture of sheer hatred and euphoria in his voice. "The second great traitor in my ranks! Come and taste death!"

Voldemort's gaze fell on Bellatrix, inevitably, as Regulus had feared. And as he had also feared, it did not bounce off him so easily.

"Bellatrix!" he yelled, horrified. His most loyal servant, his closest confidant, gone. Oh, hopefully it hurt like Regulus thought it would.

"*You* did this?" he roared. Regulus, as much as he reveled in Voldemort's rage, knew he had to run.

A bloodcurdling scream. Dumbledore turned away, but could not quite resist the blast. It hurled him away, giving Voldemort a few precious seconds.

"*Your end,*" Voldemort rumbled to Regulus, and it was in the kind of voice that carried throughout the entire hall. It wasn't even phrased as a threat. Regulus knew that tone. It was an inevitability. A sealed fate.

He wondered if it was worth running. To give his body, screaming with exhaustion, the chance of rescue. But he decided against it. Today, even if only at the very last day of his life, he was going to be brave. Just like James, Remus, Barty, Dorcas and even his stupid brother Sirius had taught him.

He stopped. Turned towards death. But without having given up. He had his dignity, his wand and his determination. And he would fight, however hopeless it might be.

"Are you tired of living?" shouted Dorcas, who by now at the latest had realised the situation Regulus was in. He would have preferred to shout something like *'You should know that by now'*, but he could no longer afford to take his eyes or concentration off Voldemort for even a second. The dark lord seemed to grow before him, growing darker, like a monster fully revealed for the first time, in all his hideousness. And the monster wanted to devour Regulus.

There was something quick and aggressive about Voldemort's curses. He was able to fire a whole salvo in a few seconds without even a sound leaving his lips. It was all the more difficult to ward them off.

Regulus was a solid duelist, but a curse from Voldemort was like a huge wave slapping against a surf. To avoid succumbing to it, he had to stand rock solid, not hesitate for a second, not doubt for a second. Regulus was good, but not good enough.

He didn't know exactly who was saving his life at that moment. Whether it was Dorcas who came running behind him swearing wildly, whether it was Dumbledore who resumed the fight at that moment, or pure luck. Something made Voldemort miss when Regulus was too slow.

Then there were three of them. Dorcas, Dumbledore and him. A mismatched trio, but they worked together as if they had done nothing else for years. Without exchanging a word, they coordinated, backed each other up and began to circle Voldemort. But despite their virtuoso three-way fight, Voldemort could not be accommodated. Didn't gain the upper hand, but still didn't lose control at any second.

More footsteps approached. Among them were the characteristic trudging footsteps of Moody, along with others who had somehow managed to break free of the positional battle and join them. Soon after, there were five of them, then six, seven. It was enough to make Voldemort struggle for the first time.

It was incredible. Regulus still hardly dared to become euphoric, but he was aware of the significance of the situation. No Death Eater could come to his aid. And the Order's will to fight was making them grow to new heights.

Regulus couldn't help but look around for Remus. He should actually be there, should be standing right next to him. It was everything they had hoped for, every night, alone in the hut, buried deep in their research and guilt. This was what they had been working towards. It almost felt wrong not to share this moment with him.

But Regulus still couldn't let his guard down. Remus was surely fighting tooth and nail elsewhere, just as doggedly as he was. Regulus would help finish it for him.

As good, as feared, as great as Voldemort was, he stood no chance against seven opponents of that calibre. It wasn't long before he lost his balance and Dumbledore succeeded. Succeeded in disarming Lord Voldemort.

The wand flew straight into Dumbledore's hand. All at once, silence seemed to fall. Everyone present, who had been circling Voldemort,

suddenly paused, not knowing how to continue, not having dared to think so far in their wildest dreams. Even the grim, always composed Moody looked as if he were completely speechless.

Not Dumbledore, though. Dumbledore was too professional for that, perhaps too calculating, too cold. Regulus didn't care. He felt only anticipation as Dumbledore casually put away Voldemort's wand and pointed his own at Voldemort, who all at once, though still standing, had lost all threatening size.

"Any last words, Tom?" asked Dumbledore, in his most caring yet cold voice.

Voldemort looked deep into Dumbledore's eyes, his wide, animal-like pupils flashing dangerously, before laughing.

"You can't get rid of me, old man. Try as you might. *You can't get rid of me*."

Dumbledore didn't look impressed. Neither did Regulus.

"Don't worry," Regulus said, almost casually, though he savored every word. "We have laid your troubled soul to rest. You can go into death with peace of mind."

Voldemort's gaze flickered to Regulus. Had he understood yet what Regulus was trying to say? Rather be on the safe side.

"Horcruxes are not a certainty for every circumstance, *Tom,"* Regulus whispered. To think he would ever be able to mock him like that, the man he had feared so terribly. "We disposed of them, as a small demonstration of that."

Oh, there it was, the fear. And it only increased when Dumbledore added, with calm finality, "You will not return. Not in this world."

And before Voldemort could retort anything, ruin the wonderful moment, Dumbledore did it. And he managed to do it in a way that didn't feel anticlimactic, but final, rather.

Elegantly he waved his long wand and he freed them all from the disease, the evil that bore the name Lord Voldemort.

Lord Voldemort died.

And the nightmare finally came to an end.

Regulus, abruptly drained of all power, sank to the ground only a few seconds after Voldemort. Only, unlike him, Regulus was full of life, full of euphoria, full of lightness.

Remus, we did it, he thought, overjoyed. *Look at it, we won.*

We won.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Time of Dying' by Three Days Grace

I hope the battle turned out all right! It took SO long to write... Next chapter is almost ready. It will bring some more answers❤

Thanks for reading!

See ya! :*

Chapter 64: Hold On

Chapter Notes

CW Injuries, Blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And now, after all we've said and done

How do we keep the rising sun from shutting down?

Are we what we pretend to be?

The only happiness Regulus had ever known was a conditional one. Euphoria, relief, joy - they always came at a price, lifted him up just to crash him back down with full force. That's how it had always been.

They had defeated Voldemort. Once and for all. Had also brought down the remaining Death Eaters in a short, but violent battle. Everything had worked out. Everything was perfect.

Up until they examined the battlefield, and the losses. Up until they returned to the back entrance.

They found Remus behind a half-buried barricade. Slumped, grey, in his own pool of blood. Just as motionless as the bloodstained body over which he was bent, seemingly frozen forever. A sight that burned itself into Regulus's head. That he would never be able to forget again.

Unable to move closer, his knees weak, the horror greater than anything he had ever known before, Regulus watched his comrades examine Remus, gently leaning him back against the barricade, showing how terrible he looked, how *dead*. Nausea, dizziness threatened to overwhelm him.

Don't do this to me. Don't do this to me.

Remus, don't you dare fucking do this to me.

If this was the price for victory, it was too high.

If this was the punishment for Regulus's happiness, he would never be happy again.

In the end, it took a touch on the carotid artery to save Regulus from collapse.

Twice, in fact.

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Remus didn't look any more alive now that he was in the hospital bed, though. He didn't look like he was sleeping, like the worst was over. He looked like he was fighting for his life, breathing shallow, catheters everywhere, his skin as if translucent. It was terrifying.

If this had been a normal hospital, Remus's blood loss might have been fatal. And even now, it wasn't looking good.

Regulus sat down beside his bed and grasped his hand. He longed to go back to that light, incredible moment of euphoria when Voldemort had collapsed before his eyes and he had known that all their efforts and hardships had not been in vain. Before reality had caught up with him again.

He let the time pass. He didn't want to leave Remus's side, not after all they had been through. But maybe he was also being a little selfish, maybe that was his strategy, to shut himself off from the outside world. To avoid the aftermath.

It only worked for a few hours. Then Regulus heard the characteristic clacking in the corridor, the insistent knocking and ultimately Moody's scowl. His head was bandaged, the bandage extending over his left eye. Otherwise, he seemed to have come out of the battle reasonably well.

"Here you are," he grumbled and Regulus looked at him, waiting.

"Will you come with me for a moment?" He was polite enough to phrase it as a question, but Regulus knew he didn't have much choice.

He nodded, rose and followed Moody out of the room. He didn't direct him to any other room, or office, just down the empty corridor to where no one could hear them.

To disguise the stiffness in his limbs and his nervousness, Regulus leaned against the wall, arms crossed in front of his chest in an emphatically casual manner. Moody looked at him in silence for a moment, as always it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

"What's up?" asked Regulus casually, moistening his lips.

"There are some things coming up now," Moody began, his voice unusually quiet and without its usual edge. "That concern you as well."

"Such as?" Regulus could think of a few things, but he preferred to leave it to Moody to say it in his soothing sobriety.

"The investigation is underway. The main focus, of course, is on all the Death Eaters we've been busting..." Moody gave him a meaningful look. "But not only."

"You mean I'll be arrested soon too?"

"Possibly."

"Okay." The word tasted stale on his tongue. He had expected it. It had been part of the deal from the beginning. "And what about Remus and Barty?"

"Same thing." Moody looked at him with his uninjured eye, looking almost regretful.

"Fine, I'll tell Barty," Regulus said, as if it was no big deal. "And Remus, as soon as he wakes up..."

"Listen," Moody muttered urgently. "I may not be the most caring or friendly person, but I know when I'm in someone's debt."

His voice flaked and he cleared his throat noisily. He cast an appraising glance down the corridor before leaning further towards Regulus. "You're wearing the bloody mark and I'm sure you've got

some dirt on you... but without you and the other two, there would be no Ministry of Magic now."

Regulus appreciated the words. Especially coming from someone like him.

"That is why I will work to ensure that you are not lumped in with the other Death Eaters. I am only one of many Aurors, but my voice will carry weight. And I'm not the only one who was there a few days ago and saw you fight. Maybe some others will agree with me. Then the chances would not be bad at all."

"I don't mind a punishment," Regulus muttered, even if it wasn't true. "I've done enough wrong to warrant it." He looked pleadingly at Moody, revealing a small glimmer of the fear that smouldered within him. "But I don't want to go to Azkaban."

"I'll try anything," Moody said in a tone that could probably be described as caring by his standards. "I just wanted to give you a heads up. You may be visited by Aurors soon."

"Thanks."

"How's Lupin?" he asked, gesturing with his thumb towards Remus's room.

"Critical," Regulus replied curtly. "The blood loss has weakened him so much that his body is overwhelmed with healing."

"It'll be fine," Moody murmured hesitantly. It was evident from just those few words that he was even more ambivalent towards him. But he had asked after him. Regulus decided to take that as a good sign.

For a moment there was silence between them and Regulus considered excusing himself and returning to Remus, but then Moody was already speaking up again.

"By the way, the funerals are the day after tomorrow. It will be a big ceremony where everyone will be buried at once. I know you didn't know most of them, but I wanted to let you know anyway. You can come. Crouch Jr. too. Lupin probably won't be back on his feet by then..."

Regulus was touched by the invitation.

"Thank you very much. I'll be glad to come. Barty certainly will too."

"Good." Moody tugged impatiently at his bandage as if the wound itched underneath. "Then if you'll excuse me, I have some work to do. Let me know if Lupin wakes up."

"I will, thank you." Moody nodded with a scowl and then stomped off. Regulus paused for another moment leaning against the wall, collecting himself. Leaden exhaustion settled on him as he thought of all that had piled up on him the last few days, all that would continue to pile up on him in the future.

This was not how he would have imagined the days after defeating Voldemort. In his fleeting hopes in his study, he had seen himself in a frenzy of bliss, endless celebrations, crowds of joyful, grateful faces.

But in such hopes there were also no deaths. No injuries, no suffering.

Regulus stumbled down one floor to a coffee machine that, despite magical gadgetry, was every bit as rancid as the old things in other hospitals. He had a cup of hot, black coffee put in his hand and sipped it carefully. It was far too hot to taste of anything but pain, but Regulus didn't mind it much.

He turned away from the machine and let his gaze wander down the corridor. He knew that some members of the Order were lying here too, recuperating. Among them James, who was still healing from his splintered elbow and being entertained day and night by Lily and Harry. But others, too, like...

Regulus lowered his cup a little as his gaze lingered on said door. A thought occurred to him, a stupid one, probably. But the beauty of inner exhaustion was that the prospect of a stupidity committed and its consequences became far less frightening. So he followed his thought, got another coffee and stomped to the door.

He allowed himself one last, deep breath before knocking cautiously with his elbow.

It took a few seconds, then the muffled "Come in" sounded and Regulus felt nervousness shoot through his veins, despite his propagated unexcitedness.

Before he could change his mind, Regulus hastily entered the room. It was afternoon and bright sunshine lit the room. The bed was empty, instead someone sat at the small, white table in front of the window,

had turned away from Regulus, had pushed the bright curtain to one side and was looking outside. Regulus swallowed, cleared his throat, got it over with.

"Sirius?"

Sirius froze at the sound of his voice and it reminded Regulus far too much of James's reaction. But unlike James, Sirius didn't bother with any made-up hocus-pocus, he turned immediately. Stiffly, clumsily, but instantly. Sirius had always been someone who ripped off the band-aids quickly.

Before Sirius could do anything but look at him with wide eyes, Regulus was already intervening.

"I know you have a lot of questions. Do you mind if I sit down? I brought coffee." Regulus made an effort to sound normal, casual, as if he hadn't just revealed to his nemesis of a brother that he was not only alive and kicking, but also on his side.

Sirius took a few seconds, staring at him aghast, before something almost like resignation settled on his features, the bitter kind, the '*what else is going to happen next?*' kind. He snorted snidely.

"I don't care."

Regulus hurriedly bridged the distance between them, sat down in the second chair, opposite Sirius, and placed the steaming coffee cup in front of him. Sirius was still looking at him, his gaze now cold, calculating. But at least he wasn't shouting.

"What is this?" he asked, and Regulus knew there were a thousand more questions in it.

Why are you here? Why are you alive? And why are you bringing me coffee?

Regulus knew Sirius would have little patience with him, so he kept it as brief as possible.

"I helped kill Voldemort. I fought with him, on the Order's side."

"Ah, yes," was all Sirius made, and Regulus knew exactly what he was trying to say.

"I only faked my death so I could look for Horcruxes in peace. They're

soul parts that Voldemort..."

"James told me what Horcruxes are." Sirius looked out the window. Regulus tried not to pay too much attention to how sunken his face looked. "Even though he seems to have kept a lot of other things from me."

"He only did it to protect you."

Sirius had strange glint in his eyes. "What was he trying to protect me from? The truth?"

"We didn't want to overwhelm you... after everything that happened with..."

"How kind of you," Sirius scoffed.

"Well, that's what I'm here for now... to clear it up."

"Good, then I know about it now." Sirius kept looking out of the window as if what he was seeing was a thousand times more interesting than his brother, who was supposed to be dead.

"Sirius..."

"You can go." Snippy and curt, the tone hadn't changed. God, what had happened to them? There had been a time when nothing could have separated them.

"I'm sorry," he said, simply because he couldn't bring himself to get up again. As if to give himself courage, he sipped his coffee, which by now had reached a bearable temperature. It didn't help.

"About what exactly?" asked Sirius, in a deep, sighing exhale, as if this conversation was an annoying inconvenience.

"Everything." Where should he start? He'd be lying if he said he didn't still harbour resentment deep inside. But after a battle like that, after everything that had happened, after everything he had been through with Remus, it was probably appropriate to finally bury the hatchet.

"Everything?" asked Sirius, frowning slightly. He still wasn't looking at him, it was driving Regulus crazy.

"Yes, everything. The things I used to say to you, back at Hogwarts. For not helping you when Mum had another one of her fits. For insulting your friends. I know now that you were suffering as much as

I was."

"Wow," he finally gave him a look, if only a brief one. "The whole thing, then."

This seeming indifference made any agitation inside Regulus shrink to disappointment.

"I'm serious. I want to apologise."

"Yeah well, you know what? You-" Sirius stopped himself abruptly, closing his eyes. Then he finally bit his brittle lower lip and grabbed the coffee cup with a trembling hand. But he didn't drink from it, just held onto it.

"I really mourned you when I read it in the paper," he said, his voice occupied. "Didn't think I was capable of that myself. After everything that's happened."

"We haven't had it easy," Regulus agreed, and Sirius at least didn't contradict him.

"I think..." Sirius drifted off and finally sighed. "I'll think about it. About the apology."

Regulus knew that was already more than he could have expected. And despite this indirect invitation to leave, Regulus still didn't want to give up.

"I'm glad you seem better," he said carefully, trying to remember what James had told him about his condition. "Are you able to move around to some extent yet?"

Sirius sounded wooden as he spoke. "The doctors said it will be weeks before the paralysis is completely gone. Walking is still difficult for me."

"Do you remember what happened? Who did this to you?"

"Dolohov. That asshole beat me in a duel. But instead of killing me, he wanted me to hear and witness every of my friends's deaths, unable to move or help. Really seemed to have it in for me in particular."

Regulus swallowed. "That sounds like him. He was always digging up sick spells like that. And he always loved to make people suffer."

"Seems like you knew him pretty well."

"I hated him," Regulus clarified. "Like I hated most of the others. That's why I left, too."

"Hmm." Sirius's fingers brushed over the cup, hesitantly. His gaze followed the small, inconspicuous clouds of steam rising from it. Regulus would give anything to be able to see inside his head.

"Is he still alive?"

"Who?"

"...You know exactly who I mean."

Regulus tried to catch his gaze, but Sirius again steadily avoided it. Eventually, he gave in. Partly because he didn't want to trample the tender plant of curiosity.

"Yes, Remus is still alive. He's not out of the woods yet, though. He got hit pretty bad..."

"I know," Sirius said curtly, his fingers pressing against the frosted porcelain. "I was there..." And finally, after a moment's hesitation. "I was awake."

"Yes..." Regulus regarded Sirius thoughtfully. He remembered the image they had given off, their closeness. Regulus wondered if Remus had said anything before loosing consciousness. And if seeing Remus seemingly die had done anything to Sirius. Anything that had caused that obvious nervousness on his face.

"But I think he'll be fine," Regulus added, more optimistic than he felt.

"Okay," Sirius said, as if he didn't care. Regulus couldn't tell if he did or not. He still sensed an opportunity.

"He's changed."

"Leave it."

"I know he has. It was me who..."

"Go now."

"No."

Sirius's gaze was so sharp that Regulus almost caught his words in his throat. But only almost.

"Listen, give me a minute," he pleaded. "Just one minute. I swear to you I'll never bring it up again after that. Please."

Blanched anger was written all over Sirius's face, making him look cruel and ugly. But although Regulus was firmly convinced that Sirius would shoo him out of the room, something seemed to stop him. He caught his anger, laboriously, swallowed it, closed his eyes strained.

"Then get it over with. And then fuck off."

Regulus wasted no time.

"Listen, I know how he was in the beginning, how cruel, how cold. I was there the day Voldemort created him. But the method he used was experimental and not without flaws. Remus was not completely gone. He slipped through the cracks, more and more. I helped with it, yes, but it was mostly just him. And you. Your love helped bring him back. You changed him. And now he loves you more than anything."

"You have no idea." Sirius's voice trembled.

"Yes I do." Regulus took a deep breath. "I do. I've been living with him for the last year. He has a picture of you next to his bed. He talks to it every night. He went through all the hardships of the Horcrux hunt just for you. And he let me know that all the time, too."

"Or maybe he was just fooling you. Who knows."

"No one fools me," Regulus said. "Except myself."

Sirius looked out the window again, his escape. The anger hadn't faded, his fingers clawed so hard into his mug that his nail beds were chalky white. But he didn't scream, he didn't rage, he didn't curse Remus. He just looked out the window. And the next time he blinked, tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I want to be alone," Sirius whispered, and the next gush of tears followed. "Your minute is up."

"Okay," Regulus said, watching worriedly as Sirius's shoulders began to shake. He felt the need to comfort him, but he didn't know how. Sirius would want no touch, no comforting words. How did one comfort someone who had only known comfort as a means of manipulation?

Following an impulse, he rummaged in his pocket, finally pulling out

the fresh pack of cigarettes. He had gotten it for Remus, for when he woke up. But he certainly wouldn't miss one cigarette more or less.

He hurriedly opened the pack and held it out to Sirius, who was so busy trying to keep his tears under control that he didn't notice until a few seconds later. He hastily wiped his face and eyed them critically.

"Only if you want. And don't worry, nobody here will give a shit if you have one."

If there was defiance or pride in Sirius, he didn't let it show. With shaky fingers, he grabbed a cigarette and clamped it between his lips. Regulus didn't get more than a nod, but it was enough for him.

"I'll be off then. If anything comes up, you can always come to me."

Sirius lit his cigarette with a flick of his fingers and once again wiped away the tears that wouldn't stop coming.

"See you soon, Sirius."

He didn't reply, instead blew smoke into the air and looked outside, his shoulders still shaking faintly.

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The conversation had robbed Regulus of the last of his energy. Although he wouldn't necessarily say it was a disaster... it would be very difficult to talk Sirius out of his grudge. But maybe that had been the first step.

As if pulled by an invisible string, Regulus shuffled along the barren corridor to the end, to the room next to the stairs. He knocked softly, waited for the cautious "Yes?" and finally pushed his way into the room. Here the curtains were drawn against the afternoon sun, blocking out almost all light. The only source of light was the small bedside lamp.

"Reg? What's up?" asked Barty, rubbing his tired eyes.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

"Oh, no, just rested my eyes a bit." A small smile played around his

lips and he motioned Regulus to come closer.

"How are you feeling?" asked Regulus as he complied.

"It's quite good again. I got a few more potions earlier and my leg feels much better. I think they'll let me go the day after tomorrow at the latest."

"I'm glad." Regulus forced himself to return the smile and when he arrived at Barty's bedside he leaned down and kissed him gently.

Barty put his arms around his shoulders, holding him close. It ultimately ended in Regulus sliding to him under the thin blanket and snuggling up to him, bathing himself in his warmth. Immediately it pulled some of the exhaustion from his limbs.

"Is everything okay? You seem down." Barty had his arm around Regulus and was pressing small, light kisses to his forehead.

"I spoke to Moody... and to Sirius."

"Oh wow," Barty laughed softly. "Which one has been worse?"

"Both equally... in their own way." Regulus closed his eyes and again put his arm over Barty's stomach, feeling his pulse and how his chest rose and fell slightly. A wonderful feeling.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yes." Regulus sighed, "But not now."

"Whenever you feel like it, love."

A warm feeling spread in Regulus's chest.

"I'll be glad when we can go home again," Regulus murmured, pressing himself even closer to him.

"Me too... along with Remus." Barty didn't sound as sure as he possibly wanted to.

"Of course." Neither did Regulus.

He allowed himself a few more minutes of comfort before he sat up with a heavy heart and looked at him apologetically.

"I have to go see Remus," he whispered, and Barty understood.

"Give him my best when he wakes up."

When, not if.

Regulus kissed him, closed his eyes.

"Come back soon," Barty whispered when they finally broke away.

"Of course." *Never again will I keep you waiting.*

His warmth lingered all the way to the door. For a short while it made him believe that everything might be all right after all.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Hold On' by Lola Marsh

FINALLY we got the talk of talks between Sirius and Reg!

See ya.

Chapter 65: Who Are You, Really?

Chapter Notes

CW Mental Distress

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Who, who are you really?

And where are you going?

I have nothing left to prove

'Cause I have nothing left to lose

See me bare my teeth for you

Who, who are you?

The midday sun lay heavy on Remus. It made his limbs weak, pushed his eyelids down. Held him in a comforting, unyielding embrace. It was all he needed right now.

In front of him was a lake, *their* lake. From there it splashed, an unnatural, loud splash, as if someone were wading quickly through the shallow waters on the shore. It became less, eventually stopped altogether. Remus guessed what would come next. But he didn't mind, on the contrary. It was everything he had ever wanted.

"You sleepyhead!", Remus heard Sirius say, but he didn't open his eyes. As expected, a second later he felt Sirius hugging him with his soaking wet body, laughing thievishly. "That's what you get for always lying around lazily!"

Remus didn't mind the cold wetness, even supported Sirius in his endeavour, putting his arms around him and just pressing him closer.

"Gotcha," he murmured, opening his eyes, just a crack. The sun blinded him, but he could still see Sirius's face. Young, healthy, happy. The way he had looked before Remus had got his hands on him. Before...

"How long are you going to snooze? You're boring as hell," Sirius complained with a laugh, stroking Remus's hair.

"Forever," he whispered, lifting his head and bridging the distance between them. Sirius came to his rescue, meeting him halfway. Their lips met and Remus was home.

And when they broke away again, Sirius was already dried by the sun and his body radiated its familiar warmth. He was half lying on Remus's torso, his hands flat on his chest, their faces only far enough apart to look at each other.

"Forever would be nice," Sirius said, a soft smile on his lips. He lifted a hand, brushed the unruly curl from Remus's forehead behind his ear. Blew a kiss on his nose.

"But you know you can't."

"Why not?", Remus let his hands slide down Sirius's back, over his soft skin.

"You know why." Sirius was still smiling, but the smile took on a melancholy feel. It made deep discomfort awaken in Remus. He didn't want to hear it. Absolutely not.

"I want to be with you. Why would I want to leave?"

Sirius clasped his face, so lovingly. So impossible.

"I'm not leaving without you", Remus added, desperately.

Sirius looked at him, sad now. But Remus knew he was only reflecting what Remus was feeling. Because he wasn't real. He was dead.

"You still have to, love."

I know.

"There's no point anyway. I've been through enough. I don't want to anymore."

Sirius shook his head, indulgent, but still final.

"I love you," he said, because Remus wanted him to. Though it was a relic of the past, an eternal memorial. An accumulation of all the missed opportunities.

"I love you too," he replied, hugging Sirius, one last time.

"Good, now wake up."

And Remus obeyed.

***

The warmth was gone, the sun, the light breeze. All gone. Remus was left with nothing.

And even though he didn't want to, even though he saw no reason to and would rather never wake up again, he opened his eyes. And instead of Sirius's sun-browned, loving face, he saw Regulus's. Narrow, pale, full of worry.

"Remus?" A hand came to rest on his shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

Remus nodded weakly, incapable of words.

"Oh, thank goodness. You gave us a huge scare!" Out of the corner of his eye, Remus saw Regulus flick a switch to call a doctor. Then he lit the lamp beside his bed and leaned over him again.

"Do you remember what happened?" asked Regulus, a little more subdued now. He looked sleepy, his eyes small, his face red. It had to be the middle of the night.

"Yes," Remus said chokingly. Even though he didn't want to. Though he would do anything not to remember. Not to see his dead, frozen face in front of him.

"We did it!" whispered Regulus, a wide smile on his face. "We defeated Voldemort!"

Remus had thought as much. The only reason he had been condemned to wake up again. To continue to endure this torture.

Regulus eyed him intently, his lack of reaction. His euphoria was increasingly falling apart.

"Remus, what's wrong?" he asked in his typically earnest, analytical tone. It came across as mockery to Remus.

"*What's wrong*?" How could he even ask that? Wasn't it perfectly clear, wasn't it completely obvious?

"I have failed," he eventually summed up quietly. Never had three words felt more bitter on his tongue.

"What are you talking about?" Regulus looked as if he wanted to shake him. "We won! All the shit we've been through, it finally paid off!"

"And Sirius?" Remus burst out, frantic, hysterical. "What good will it do me if Sirius... if he..." Fuck, he couldn't say it. He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

Regulus looked at him caringly. "It'll be fine. Believe me. I even spoke to him yesterday. I think... I think it was a beginning..."

"What?" Regulus's words did not reach him. He wouldn't let them. He would not make this mistake.

"Yes, he was really upset, but he let me talk. I was able to tell him that you've changed. I don't know exactly what he was thinking, but I think we can keep trying."

Remus clutched at his duvet, only now noticing all the catheters around him. What was Regulus talking about?

"But Sirius is dead," he said, though it hurt beyond belief.

Regulus's eyebrows shot up. Then, slowly, as realisation washed over his face, they lowered again. With a cautious smile, he shook his head, placed his hand on Remus's cramped fist.

"No, Remus. He's alive. He was just paralysed and couldn't move. But he's alive. I promise. I spoke to him."

Tears swam in Remus's eyes and gravity pulled at them relentlessly, but he would not give in to it. He knew what he would set in motion if he did.

"Remus, he's alive." Regulus shook him gently, insistently. "He's alive. Believe me."

And when he hugged him and whispered "he's alive" over and over, Remus eventually couldn't resist any longer and gravity won out.

He cried as if it was the first time in his life. A liberating blow. With proportions Regulus couldn't even imagine.

He cried.

And he couldn't stop.

***

The Aurors came to the hospital three days later to arrest him. Regulus had already warned Remus about this, so he didn't make a big fuss about it. They were firm, but not aggressive, and when Remus made it clear that he would come with them voluntarily, they did not even handcuff him. Regulus, who had hardly left his side since his awakening, accompanied him here, too, all the way out, telling him again and again that everything would be all right, that he wouldn't go to prison. Remus wasn't so sure.

They disappeared as soon as they left the hospital. But to his amazement, they didn't take Remus to the Ministry of Magic. Instead, they took him to a dark, unfamiliar chamber, dimly lit by three large candles on a candelabra, standing on a round table in the middle. Someone was already sitting at it, waiting for him. It was Albus Dumbledore.

"There seems to have been no incident. I'm glad to hear that," Dumbledore said in his calm, relaxed teacher's voice. Remus waited and finally sat down when Dumbledore wordlessly offered him a seat.

"To what do I owe the honour?" he asked cautiously while Dumbledore was looking at him over the rim of his half-moon glasses. Would he call him to account personally?

"I'd like a quiet word, for now," Dumbledore said, the hint of a smile on his lips. Remus didn't know if it was a good sign or a bad.

"About what?"

"About how things will go with you."

"I'm all ears." Remus was nervous, of course. Azkaban was looming, a Dementor's Kiss, a life of agony and hopelessness. After recovering from his breakdown, he had realised he had other plans for his life than that.

"First of all, I want to express my gratitude to you. I've had Alastor

explain to me in great detail what you, along with Miss Meadowes, Mister Black and Mister Crouch, contributed to our victory over Voldemort."

"You're welcome," Remus said soberly. The big 'but' was already hanging in the air.

"But I hope you realise that you've not off the hook."

"Yes, I do."

"For the next few minutes, I want you to be honest with me, without exception." Dumbledore looked unusually stern at these words. "If I feel even once that you are lying to me, then this conversation is over immediately and I will personally ensure that you are sent to Azkaban."

Remus swallowed. Nodded.

"Have you even once been among werewolf packs and made contact with Fenrir Greyback?"

"No," Remus said curtly. "The brainwashing was done before your request for support."

"That means everything you provided me with in terms of reports was a lie?"

"Correct. I didn't even speak to Greyback."

"I see." How many efforts had Dumbledore made based on his false reports? All wasted time.

"And instead you participated in missions to kill Ministry officials and Muggleborns?"

"Yes." This part was going to get unpleasant.

"How many missions are we talking about?"

"Dozens." Remus mused. "Between two and four every month, for about two years."

"And how many people have you killed?"

Remus lowered his eyes. He thought of the apothecary, his first victim. Of Marlene's mother, Edgar's family, of the countless, innocent

Ministry officials.

"Too many," he finally said. "Far too many."

"Do you regret that today?"

Remus stared at the table as if his eyes were glued to it.

"Their faces haunt my sleep every night." He hoped that was enough of an answer. It was the first time he'd ever said it out loud.

"So you would say that your moral code has changed over time?"

"I will never kill again. *Never*." Remus couldn't quite verbalise how much he meant it. "I wasn't myself. But that doesn't excuse it."

"True, it doesn't," Dumbledore agreed with him quietly.

Then, strangely, a little laugh escaped him. "You're offering me an interesting philosophical question here."

"Which one?"

"Where the murderer Remus Lupin in you ends and the righteous Remus Lupin begins. How much blame the person sitting in front of me still carries. How much of their old self is still left."

"If you have an answer to that, please let me know. It would help me a lot."

Dumbledore's gaze was sympathetic. "I have an inkling of what must be going on inside you. And I sense the agony you must have suffered when this was done to you. You were never given a choice."

The fact that Dumbledore was talking about the brainwashing happening to *him* and not the old, different Remus made him sad for some reason. It was a good sad, though. A hurt one, one finally seen, finally heard. One that Remus hadn't even known was lurking inside him.

"I appreciate that, thank you."

"For my part," Dumbledore gave him a serious look. "I believe that you have overcome your darkest side. While this is not the boy I dismissed from Hogwarts, it is certainly not a monster either." Silence. "And for me, I suppose that's enough."

Remus looked at him intently, waiting.

Dumbledore took his time before continuing. Leaning forward in his chair, he placed his hands on the table in an inviting manner. "I'm going to make you a proposition now. One that I'd like you to think through carefully."

"I'm listening." Remus mirrored Dumbledore's gesture, his heart beating to his throat.

"I will make sure that no charges are brought against you. Your record will be looked upon with particular favour by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and ultimately filed away without further ado."

That sounded almost too good to be true. "And what do I have to do for that?"

Dumbledore smiled. "What I've wanted you to do all along."

Remus thought for a second. "Werewolves?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Even without Voldemort, the packs are completely out of control under Greyback. We're lucky he didn't take them to the Ministry, but they're still a major threat. I need someone to track them down and make a real effort to pacify them and bring them back into society."

"Okay."

"Okay?" asked Dumbledore with raised eyebrows. "Are you ready to do this? It could be a lengthy affair. And quite dangerous."

"It's still a thousand times better than rotting in prison," Remus muttered. "And I can do some good. I'm sure there are some in the packs who can be brought back into society."

"I think so too. We have ostracised and ignored them for far too long. I'm afraid if we carry on like this, it will soon come to a bad end."

"Probably." Remus took a deep breath. "And what will that look like? Much like the first time?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Exactly the same. You go to them once a month, track them down and then report back to me. That's all it is."

Remus held out his hand, looking at Dumbledore promptingly. "I'll do

it. Thank you."

Dumbledore shook it.

"Officially, you can rejoin the Order if you want to," Dumbledore said as he gently released the handshake. "I don't think it will be disbanded for now, still too much to do. They will continue to meet once a month. You can attend if you wish."

"Thank you, I will." If the Order accepted him, that is.

"Good, if you have no other questions, you are dismissed." He gestured to the two Aurors who had been standing silently behind him. "These gentlemen will take you back to the hospital if you have any further need."

"Thank you." With that, Remus rose. He was slightly unsteady on his feet, probably because of the underlying tension that had now fallen from him. He was *free*.

"What about Regulus and Barty? Do you know if they will be punished?"

"I have no part in that," Dumbledore said lightly. "I leave those negotiations entirely to Alastor. But I would be rather optimistic if I were you." A gentle smile. Remus returned it gratefully. Just as he was about to turn away and make his way out of the room, he heard Dumbledore raise his voice again.

"Regarding what I said about your guilt..." Remus stopped. "That is what *I* think. However, you should be aware that there will be other people who think differently about this. There will be people who will not forgive you. And you will have to accept that."

A name hung in the air, pressing on Remus's eardrums. Yet none of them spoke it.

"I know." Some people in his life he would have lost forever. Probably not even a few. He would have to learn to live with that.

"I hope for your sake that people will follow their hearts in their decision."

"Me too," Remus just whispered and left the room.

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"Oh, it'll be fine," Regulus said, surely for the third time in the last five minutes. But even that didn't interrupt Remus's frantic pacing back and forth.

"He'll be there," Remus said hurriedly. "I can't go."

"Sure you can." Regulus had crouched down on the floor and was calmly putting on his shoes. Barty, ready to leave for quite a while, was already waiting outside the hut.

"He won't accept me there."

Remus could literally feel Regulus rolling his eyes. "I told you. Moody and Dumbledore have ordered us to be at the Order meetings. The others have to accept us. Even Sirius."

Remus was only partially comforted by the thought. It had been over two weeks since the battle at the Ministry, yet Remus had not laid eyes on Sirius once. Had only taken Regulus at his word, only knew through him that he was still alive. Knew that he still hated him, probably more than ever after what Remus had done at the battle. Remus would not endure his hateful gaze. Not if he was the first thing Remus was allowed to see of Sirius again.

"Now don't shit yourself, Remus, this is unbearable," Regulus clamoured, and from the tone of his voice Remus could hear how nervous he must be himself. Remus certainly wasn't making it any better for him.

"Sorry," he muttered, trying to get himself back in line. It was maybe an hour. He would get through this. Somehow.

"Now get dressed already, we want to go." Regulus's patience seemed to be wearing thin.

"Yeah, all right." Remus put on his shoes and took his jacket off the hook. "I'm all ready."

"Wonderful." Regulus pushed open the door and gave Barty an apologetic look. Remus took one last look inside the hut before following them.

They were among the first to arrive at the agreed meeting place. It was no longer a top-secret safehouse, as it had been at the height of the war, but simply a meeting room in Elphias Doge's villa.

They had deliberately arrived earlier than most. Better to endure the dismissive faces trickling in one by one before twenty pairs of eyes were on him at once. The only ones who had beaten them to it, besides Doge, were James, Lily and little Harry. Not the best lot, but it could have been worse.

"Hey" James raised his hand in greeting, looking rather stiff. Who could blame him?

"Hello," Regulus took over and smiled at the small family. Remus realised that this was the first time Regulus met Lily and Harry.

"Nice to meet you, Regulus," Lily replied, nodding at him.

"Likewise."

Remus lowered his gaze, feeling a little uncomfortable with the constellation.

Regulus seemed to be holding on bravely, also greeting Harry, who was on Lily's arm, shyly pressing against her side, and hiding behind her hair.

"I'm really glad Moody was able to sort that out for you," James interjected before the silence could take root.

"Me too," Regulus muttered.

"Did he put conditions on it?"

Regulus smiled. "Why do you think we're here? We caught ourselves a couple of years of Order and reconstruction aid."

"Which, of course, is a hundred times better than any of the other alternatives," Barty hastily interjected, presumably afraid that James and Lily wouldn't see through his irony.

"That definitely," Regulus agreed. "And I can also see why our help would be well needed here. The Death Eater channels are still open and all their supporters at large. Who better to track them down than us?"

"You'll be a great help," Lily said gratefully and began to comfort Harry, who seemed a little overwhelmed with the strange faces. She looked apologetically round. "I'm sorry I have him with me today, but I just couldn't find a babysitter."

"It's no problem at all," Remus said first. "We were looking forward to meeting him."

She looked at Remus a little reluctantly, but finally nodded and hastily averted her eyes again. When Harry started to cry, she moved a few steps away and hummed a soft tune to calm him down.

James took the opportunity, approached Remus and said in a lowered voice. "Give her a few more weeks, okay? She'll get used to you being here again."

"It's okay." He was admittedly a little confused by James's kindness.

"I told her what you did for me, of course, but I think it's another thing to have been there."

"Possibly." He had almost forgotten the incident.

"I really won't forget that," James added, before stepping back again and smiling encouragingly at him. Gratefully, Remus returned the smile. At least one of them was on his side.

As they continued their somewhat forced conversation, more members trickled in. They must have already known that Remus, Regulus and Barty would be there, because most of them didn't give them a second glance.

But then, just before the start, Sirius arrived.

Remus had thought for hours about how to react. Had settled on remaining casual, only a quick glance, at most, as if his presence was perfectly normal.

In the end he didn't stick to it, of course. As soon as Sirius entered the room, Remus stared openly at him, a surge of emotion inside him that he couldn't put into words. When you had thought the love of your life had died, the return did something to you, more than whispered words from Regulus in the hospital did. Remus, thankfully, didn't burst into tears this time. But that was about all.

Sirius saw him, Remus imagined he was one of the first. He seemed to freeze on the spot, a mixture of shock and discomfort on his face.

It wasn't until Remus felt Regulus's elbow in his side that life came back to him. Hastily, Sirius straightened and walked over to Peter and Mary, who were talking quietly at the edge of the table. Remus gave him a long look.

"God, make it a bit more obvious," Regulus whispered, slightly annoyed.

Remus looked at him irritated. "I'm allowed to look at him, aren't I? I thought he was dead, you know that."

"Yeah, look at him, not stare at him like Fenrir Greyback just after a massacre of poor innocent children. You're not going to convince anyone about yourself like that."

Remus wanted to snap at him, but he held back. Regulus was right, after all.

With a long sigh, he turned away from Sirius. He knew it wouldn't be long before his gaze was glued to him again, but this way he at least gave him a bit of air to breathe. Was this how it was always going to be now? Sirius and him seeing each other once a month and exchanging nothing more than a few distant glances?

Alastor Moody stomped into the meeting room and shooed the rest of the people into their seats. Remus looked at the grim-faced Auror with interest, seeing his new magical eye for the first time as it frantically scanned everyone in the room and admittedly made him look a little crazy.

As soon as Moody was seated, he began to speak. "Good, good, glad everyone came. We've got a lot to do."

Doge, who was taking protocol as usual, raised a thumb and Moody turned to Remus, Regulus and Barty.

"I am glad that everything worked out and that you will be part of our efforts from now on." He turned to the rest of the Order. "To that end, once again the appeal to you: everyone is of course allowed to think what they want about it, but everyone is welcome to keep their thoughts to themselves. We are fighting for the same cause and we will all treat each other with respect."

Remus tried to interpret the following silence, but most faces were blank.

"Otherwise, here's what we have on the agenda for today. First of all," he raised his hand and extended his index finger, "we are making all the preparations for the Minister of Magic's big rally next week. That is, results, progress, speech shares, we need to collate and prepare all of that." He raised a second finger. "The next task will be to illuminate any existing networks close to Voldemort. This will be done with a focus on our new members." He nodded to Regulus. "We will set up a working group for that. The quicker we act on this, the more of them we can still catch."

He elaborated on the point, as well as a few minor organisational ones. The group took it all in stride, even looking reasonably determined for the most part. It was probably no comparison to the mood during the many, bloody phases of the war. They had reached the light at the end of the tunnel.

The meeting itself went quite smoothly. Volunteers were found for every task and even the working group for the escaped Death Eaters was joined by a few members, including James and Peter. Remus was somewhat left out during all this, as his task would also be a different one, but by the end of the meeting he really did feel almost like a member of the Order again. Even if one person in the room still studiously ignored his sidelong glances.

Finally, Moody ended the round with a curt "Get to work!" and dismissed them all. Remus and Regulus exchanged brief, relieved glances and waited until most of the people had left before rising. James and Lily waved at them and disappeared through the fireplace and Remus even saw Mary and Peter give them a quick nod before leaving the room. It felt good.

"You'll be fine," Regulus murmured, giving him an encouraging look. Remus almost believed him this time.

As the queue in front of the fireplace was quite long, Remus, Regulus and Barty decided to disapparate, strolling leisurely around the large mansion to do so, finally passing through the front door. A few small groups had formed outside, talking loudly.

"Can I have another smoke?" asked Remus.

"Sure."

Remus lit the cigarette and took a drag, watching the smoke drift away on the gusty autumn wind. For three puffs there was an amicable silence between them. Regulus looked at him pensively and then let his gaze slide past Remus back to the estate. Suddenly tension came into him.

"You know what?" He grabbed Barty's arm, who didn't even know what hit him. "I think we deserve some really good food today. Barty and I are going to go and get it right now. I'll meet you back at the hut in a bit! See you then!" And before Remus could utter a sound, Regulus had turned around and dragged Barty away, leaving him alone in that neatly mowed front garden.

Remus wasn't stupid. It took him exactly one second before he felt the stare on the back of his neck and knew who Regulus had caught sight of. It just didn't make the whole thing any easier. Remus didn't know where to get the courage to turn to Sirius Black at that moment. Instead, he took another shaky drag on his cigarette.

"Hey," it sounded behind him, closer than he thought. And even though it didn't sound friendly, Remus's heart did a thousand leaps in his chest. He took a deep breath before gathering all the courage he could and turning to face him.

"Hey."

Sirius scowled at him, jaw grinding and lips pressed together. And even though he was obviously making every effort to look hardened and hostile with it, Remus couldn't help but notice how beautiful he still was. How alive, how wonderful.

"Look," Sirius said tersely. "I just want to get it over with quickly. Dumbledore and the Ministry of Magic have decided to let you get away. That means I'm not going to cause any drama here either. But just to be *very* clear... I don't want anything to do with you, so stay the fuck away from me. And stop staring at me like that all the time."

The tension in Sirius's body was palpable. His fists were clenched, he was standing on the balls of his feet in front, the tendons on his neck were clearly visible. It was as if his Fight or Flight reflex had been activated. And he still wasn't looking at him, not really. Hadn't done that once since they had met again. That was the worst part, maybe.

Remus felt heaviness in his limbs, but he smiled it away bravely.

"Understood," he said, taking the risk and holding the half-empty

cigarette pack out to him.

"Do you want one?"

"What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing. I get what you're trying to tell me and I'll respect it. But I can tell you'd like a smoke right now. It's just an offer."

Sirius stared at the box as if it were a gun Remus was holding to his forehead.

"I stopped smoking", he eventually said, slowly, his body not moving an inch.

"Oh, good", Remus smiled even broader and faker and hastily put away the pack. "Since when?"

"About two weeks ago."

"Then you're stronger than I am! Reg has been telling me for weeks to stop but I just always-" He stopped himself, before he started rambling. Took a deep breath.

Calm down. He's here. He's talking to you. Don't fuck it up.

"So... you're planning on staying in the Order for now?" he tried again, cautiously.

Sirius hesitated to answer.

"For now, yes."

Remus hoped he would stay for a very long time. Longed for every situation where he could look at him, hear his voice.

"I... also wanted to apologise for the inappropriate *show* I put on at the Ministry," Remus said pointedly nonchalantly, "I would have been better off doctoring myself than... what I did."

"I really don't care." Remus didn't know what it was, but something about Sirius's voice was different. Different from the last time they'd met, when Sirius had yelled at him. This Sirius was quieter, more... reserved. And he was still standing within earshot, even answering him, that alone was incredible enough.

"Were you... conscious?" He just had to know.

Sirius looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

"Yes."

"Then... I'm even more sorry."

Sirius just stared at the grass.

"I was completely out of it. The injury, the adrenaline, the fear of losing you... I wasn't myself."

Silence again. By now all the other Order members had disappeared and they were completely alone. All Remus could still hear was the light wind rustling the leaves and the pulse pounding in his ears.

"I see." Sirius said. "And who are you really, then?"

Remus smiled, probably pained. "I'm Remus Lupin. At least, that's who I want to be."

Sirius didn't react to that. But this time Remus imagined he saw something like ... something like sadness light up in Sirius's eyes. A small, narrow glimmering '*what-if*'.

It lasted only a moment, only a blink of an eye. Then it was gone. Sirius blinked a few times and then disapparated, wordlessly, leaving Remus alone.

He didn't move, for a long time, staring at the spot were Sirius had stood as if mesmerised. His heart was pounding as if after a sprint.

'What-if'?

He took out another cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Who are You, Really?' by Mikky Ekko

We're nearing the end, my friends. Three chapters to go!

Thanks for reading! :*

See ya!

Chapter 66: The Game Of Life

Chapter Notes

Hey!
As you might have spotted, the total chapter count went up by one 😊 It's a longer story, but the gist of it is that I decided to give the epilogue its own chapter after all. I like it much better this way. Just so you know :)
Now I'm trying to leave the rest in peace the way it is lol.

Enjoy the chapter ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh, i understood everything [...]

Knew all hundred thousand figures of the game of life in my pocket,

shaken guessing the meaning,

was willing to start the game again,

to taste its agonies once more,

to shudder once more before its nonsense,

to walk through the hell of my inner being once again and many times more.

Once I would play the figure game better.

Once I would learn to laugh.

Sixteen victims had been claimed by the battle on their side. Regulus had already learned their names and the tragedy of their passing at the funeral, but now it was their faces looking down on him, projected on invisible screens in the air and with horribly blank eyes.

Sturgis Podmore, Emmeline Vance, Gideon Prewett and Dedalus Diggle. They loomed larger than life over them on the left side of the podium, looking down on them admonishingly. Beside them, numerous aurors, with the same colourless eyes. They rested heavily on Regulus's shoulders, making him avert his gaze again and again.

Despite this vigil, this was a festive event, at least on paper. The entire entrance hall of the Ministry of Magic had been solemnly decorated in black and white, kitschy-looking wreaths and flowers floating in the air, threatening to be torched by equally weightless candles. All this gave the entire entrance hall a crowded impression. This impression was reinforced by the hundreds of guests who had expectantly filled the rows of chairs in front of the podium and were staring at the person behind the lectern: the Minister of Magic, Milicent Bagnold.

"She looks like she's about to start crying," Dorcas muttered to his left, legs crossed, arms demonstratively folded in front of her chest. Perhaps it hadn't been Moody's best idea to put her right in the front row.

"I've been told she always looks like that," Regulus whispered back, looking at the minister with a furrowed brow. She hadn't been in office long, only two or three years, but you could see the war on her face. However, between the eyebrows drawn together in a tearful expression, there was also massive relief. She cleared her throat.

"My dear guests, welcome. I would never have dared to hope in my wildest dreams that we could gather here today, at the end of a long, draining, terrible war."

"Yeah, well, you haven't helped with that in the slightest," Dorcas hissed, and Regulus gave her an amused sideways glance.

"...use this occasion above all else to remember the people who gave their lives for it." She raised her arms solemnly, pointing to the pale portraits of the deceased behind her, and was silent for a moment, letting them affect those present. Regulus dared to look them in the eye again, at the same time his hand wandered to his right as if of its own accord, seeking Barty's. He didn't even need to look at him to know that they shared the same thought at that moment.

Up there they hung, the heroes. And only them. Of course there was no room for Death Eaters there. But also not for mere followers, prisoners of their family or their upbringing. For people like Evan Rosier.

The squeeze of Barty's hand was a welcome comfort, but at the same time a sad certainty. They were still here, they had made the jump. Their friend, their best friend, had not. No one would give him a minute's silence in the ministry. He would go down in the history books as a monster, alongside the likes of Bellatrix, Dolohov and Rodolphus. Yet he was just a stupid, deluded boy.

Regulus blinked a few times and tried to concentrate on what the Minister of Magic was saying. She focused on a lot of superfluous stuff, thanking unimportant, irrelevant people with the most important posts first, before finally giving her thanks to the parts of the Order that were still here.

"Without you, we wouldn't be here. Thank you for carrying the price of freedom on your shoulders."

Thunderous applause. It felt strange for Regulus to sit in their midst. He had done his part, more than that, he knew. But he still bore the name of murderers. And he had never been anything but the bad guy in his life.

Moody stepped forward to the lectern for them. On the one hand, of course, because he was Dumbledore's deputy, but on the other hand also because, according to Dorcas, he was the only one who dared to tell the unvarnished truth in a hall with hundreds, perhaps thousands of guests.

"Thank you," Moody grumbled, stifling applause. "Thank you." His magical eye spun wildly, fixing on every person in the hall for a millisecond, making him look even more intimidating than he already was.

"I'll gladly accept the thanks vicariously. My people have more than earned it too. I'm not going to start listing what hardships the last few years have meant for us, most of you wouldn't understand anyway. Rather, I would like to use this time to highlight two individuals who I think deserve special honour..."

He started with Elphias Doge, the small, corpulent wizard a few seats to Regulus's left. The backbone of the Order, without whom not a single operation would have worked, without whom the Order would have fallen apart within a few weeks. Doge himself stoically let the eulogy wash over him, only looking very closely Regulus could see that a wet glint covered his small eyes.

"My old friend, come up for a moment, show your face to the people,"

Moody said in a tone Regulus had never heard on him before. He had to sound like that when he was talking to people he really, honestly liked. It was certainly something to brag about.

Doge rose somewhat awkwardly and climbed the small flight of stairs to the top of the dais. With a wave of his hand, Moody prompted the audience to clap, which eagerly complied. Somewhat embarrassed, Doge stood next to Moody, let him pat his back encouragingly and raised his hand in thanks. Finally, as the applause slowly died down, Moody allowed Doge to escape the gaze of the crowd again.

As he hurriedly descended the stairs again, Moody continued, pronouncing the next honour.

"I also want to honour Miss Dorcas Meadowes."

Regulus felt Dorcas stiffen beside him as Moody began his praise speech for her. Called her the brain behind the battle, the link between the outcasts with good intentions and those with the power to realise those intentions. Who could put aside personal losses, differences, feelings like no other to serve the cause. Who was willing to give herself up to create a world where the things that happened to her didn't have to happen to anyone else.

With each sentence Dorcas seemed to tense more. Encouragingly, Regulus patted her arm, even though she seemed fixated on Moody the whole time. He had only known Dorcas for a few weeks, his first touch with her at the lake when she had tried to kill Remus. And yet, strangely, she had grown on him since then.

The first time Moody asked her to stand up, she didn't react at all. It was only when Regulus gently shook her that life seemed to come back to her. Then she was all the quicker, jumping up and rushing up the stairs in a matter of seconds. Next to the portly, tall Moody, she looked small and unimpressive. An appearance that was deceptive.

Again, Moody directed the crowd, and Dorcas, with an almost fearful expression in her eyes, looked over it. Finally, almost at the very end, the tiniest smile stole onto her tired face. It made her look years younger.

When she finally stepped back down the stairs, Regulus greeted her with a grin and she nodded it off gratefully. Alice, sitting on her other side, whispered a soft "Marlene would be so proud of you" to her, which did all sorts of things to her face. After settling down between them, she hastily wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Of course I could talk about every single member right now, because all of them have accepted great personal sacrifices to ensure all of your safety. Among others I am eternally grateful for Alice and Frank Longbottom's life-saving optimism and energy. For Arthur Weasley's unconventional and solution-oriented manner in times of despair."

Moody paused for a moment, during which he looked at Regulus, of all people. "And I am also grateful for Sirius and Regulus Black for showing the world that we are not hostage to our blood. That we are not what we were born to be. That we decide for ourselves how to walk our destiny."

Another pause, this time filled with lively murmurs from the crowd. Moody skilfully ignored them and once again prompted them to clap, which they finally did, albeit hesitantly.

The applause echoed in Regulus's head, where for a moment there was absolute emptiness. He clawed at Barty's hand, hundreds of stares on the back of his neck. Only Moody was brave enough to say such a thing in front of so many people, to put Regulus on a par with his brother as noteworthy members of the Order and give him a chance to start over. This was his gift to him.

Touched, he smiled at Moody, accepted the gift and then looked around in his row. He noticed Sirius first, a few seats next to him, who was also clapping, even returning his gaze and nodding reluctantly. Regulus knew exactly where to place it. Knew what a big step that gesture was. An indirect '*I accept the apology*', a concession. It meant the world to him.

Next to Sirius sat Lily and James, with Harry on their laps. They all applauded too, James putting on his warmest, proudest smile. The smile that Regulus never thought he would see again. The smile that had ultimately saved his life.

Remus sat next to James and Barty, clapping some of the loudest, grinning so wide he almost looked like he did back in seventh year. Regulus was overcome with a guilty conscience. Remus had done so much for their victory too, had put his life on the line more than once to kill Voldemort. Instead, only Regulus had been mentioned, the one who had not stabbed anyone of the Order in the heart.

Regulus found none of those thoughts in Remus's eyes, though, only honest joy and excitement. The friendship they shared, all the suffering they had endured together. Perhaps, in the end, that was

what really mattered. Regulus definitely would never forget that.

Eventually, his gaze lingered on Barty right next to him, on his crooked dimpled smile. Stayed there, since it was the only thing that could cool down all nervousness and anxiety boiling up inside him. He squeezed his hand again and returned the smile. And when the applause had eventually died down, everything inside Regulus was peacefully quiet again.

After Moody's speech and the small honours, the event unfortunately went on for quite a while and, as expected, became more and more redundant. Regulus struggled to get through and was probably one of the first to rise from his chair at the end.

"Let's get out of here," he murmured to Barty and Remus and they agreed exhaustedly. He said goodbye to the others and especially to Dorcas, who still seemed a little dazed. Regulus looked at her and then spontaneously asked, "Would you like to join us? Back to the hut and talk a bit?"

Dorcas thought about it.

"Yeah, all right."

The weather was nice for mid-October, so they conjured up a couple of comfortable chairs, set them up in a semicircle and settled down on them. Remus lit a cigarette, Barty went to get them all drinks and Regulus closed his eyes, trying to shake off the mental overstimulation from the annoying event. He only opened his eyes again when he felt something cool on his shoulder, the drink Barty held out to him.

"Thanks," Regulus murmured, accepting the bottle, which turned out to be lemonade.

"What an event," Dorcas sighed, accepting one as well.

"Real circus," Remus rolled his eyes. "It was another great chance for all those Ministry blowhards to put on a show."

Dorcas nodded in agreement. "I also want to point out again that every single one of them was welcome to assist in the battle. None wanted to. None except a few of the Aurors."

"But Moody did really well," Barty interjected, sitting down in the chair next to Remus. "His speech was the best part."

"Totally," Remus agreed, taking a sip.

Already it all felt unreal. Not just today's ceremony, but everything else. Like a terrible, terrible nightmare. At the end of which he had now arrived, together with new and old friends, and could let the sun shine on his face.

"We really did it..." he muttered, because he still couldn't believe it.

"You most of all, Reg," Barty said softly. "We were all just lost souls. You believed in us and saved us. Without you, none of this would have been possible."

"You deserved a lot more than that one, little round of applause earlier," Remus added quietly.

"Oh nonsense," Regulus said with a smile. "I've got everything I need right here."

The sun soon disappeared behind the horizon and they talked about everything and anything. At some point they conjured up blankets and a small campfire in their midst to escape the cold and continued to do so. Mostly Regulus and Barty talked, Remus and Dorcas were rather quiet and introverted. With Remus, of course, Regulus knew why. Again and again Remus stroked the new scar on his stomach and alternately looked at the rising moon and the crackling fire. His gaze was absent.

He was also the first to take his leave for bed some time later. Regulus wished him a good night and watched him walk into the hut with his shoulders slumped and the door shut behind him.

"I wish I could do more for him," Regulus murmured, brushing an annoying strand of hair behind his ear.

"I'm going to talk to Sirius again," Dorcas said unexpectedly, catching Regulus's eye. "Though I'm sure by now he's pissed off at me too, but I never cared about that sort of thing anyway."

"It can't hurt..." sighed Regulus, looking into the fire. "But I don't see what else you can say to him..."

"I'll think of something," Dorcas said in that tone of voice that always made you think she had every problem in the world under control. Perhaps she had.

"Nice of you to stick up for Remus. So can I make a final assumption that you don't want to kill him anymore?" It was meant as a joke, but Dorcas's face remained serious.

"That question has deprived me of many hours of sleep these past few days." She looked into the fire as well, her eyes small, her gaze very old. "But as much as I want to hate him, I've come to know what kind of person he is. And what he isn't." Her eyebrows were drawn together. "I don't think he needs me as an accuser anymore. He already hates himself most of all for what he did."

The casual mood was gone. For a moment, the crackling of the fire was the only sound to be heard. Regulus felt Barty's gaze on him and when he finally looked up, he blinked affectionately. Regulus returned it, but the heaviness wouldn't quite let him go.

"What are you two planning to do now?" asked Dorcas at some point, leaning forward in the chair, resting her elbows on her knees.

"Good question," Barty replied thoughtfully, exchanging a glance with Regulus.

"Not much for now," Regulus sighed. "After all, we've committed ourselves to helping the Order clean up the mess. Guess it'll take at least the next year. After that... phew."

The concept of 'future' had never been fully grasped by Regulus. Always focused on surviving the next year, the next week, the next day, he had never had an idea what it really meant.

It was only at this moment that Regulus *really* realised that he was free now. Free to do what he wanted, with whom he wanted. It was surreal.

"And what about you?" asked Barty Dorcas, while Regulus was still floating on the strange concept of freedom.

Dorcas leaned back again, her arms resting loosely on the backrests, her gaze fixed on the night sky.

"I'm going to leave," she said.

"Where to?"

"Oh, wherever I feel like going." She seemed to sink into the notion for a moment. "Marlene and I have always talked about exploring the whole world. I'm going to keep the dream going, for her sake."

"That sounds really nice," Regulus said, though his grief only increased at the thought. "But do come back! I'm sure it'll be boring for us in the long run without you."

"We'll see," Dorcas said, smiling now. "Maybe I'll find someone worth staying for."

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Even though the worst was over, the next few weeks were not easy, especially not for Barty. The magical criminal court had resumed its work and started the trial against his father. Barty was summoned as a witness and had to face his worst enemy again and testify against him. It wore on him for weeks.

"I don't want to see him," he kept saying, in bed at night, or when they had breakfast in the morning. Each time, Regulus would grab his hand and tell him that by testifying, he was helping to ensure that the bastard could do no more harm. And if all went well and they locked him away, Barty might really never have to see him again.

Of course, the day of his testimony was still bad. Regulus wasn't allowed to come along, so he was condemned to wait outside the courtroom for over four hours. Four hours that dragged on unbearably. At the end of which the door opened very quietly, a pale, exhausted Barty came out and wearily let Regulus pull him into a tight hug.

"He looked like he wanted to kill me," was all Barty said. Regulus stroked his back soothingly.

The sentence was not pronounced until weeks later, after all the evidence had been sifted through and all the witnesses had been heard. Bartemius Crouch Sr. was found guilty of dangerous physical harm, and for harbouring a Death Eater. Furthermore, investigations

by the Auror's Office had revealed that he had destroyed and falsified documents for money and had enriched himself from the department's budget. It was enough for several years in prison.

And Barty was finally free.

It was also this relief that finally gave Barty the strength to visit his mother. After almost two years since she had been at St Mungos, it was the first time. He took Regulus with him, although he hardly said a word during the visit, just watched as Barty carefully felt his way forward towards his mother, who was distant at the beginning, but after a few minutes already fell around his neck and tearfully apologised to him.

Although Regulus was happy for Barty, it reminded him of the sad certainty that such a reconciliation with his terrible parents would never be possible. They had gone into hiding and were wanted all over the country, surely already deep into the next conspiracy.

But the gloomy thought did not last long. It disappeared the moment Barty turned to him and looked at him as if he wanted to embrace the whole world. It reminded him that he had found another family.

***

They had built Evan a small memorial. Had chosen a nice spot, a green meadow, right next to a big oak tree. There they placed the memorial stone, engraved his name and the date of his birth and death, and adorned it with flowers and wreaths. It was just Regulus and Barty there, sitting next to each other on the grass, thinking of beginnings, happy school days and the innocent ignorance of what the world would yet do to them.

"I hope he forgives us," Regulus murmured softly and Barty in response just put his arm around his back.

Without exchanging another word, they must have spent an hour or more in front of the stone before they finally got up again and moved away, coming to a small dirt path and following it. A thoughtful walk, hand in hand, heads bowed. Regulus remembered the funny evenings

between the three of them, the small life outside the war and the Death Eaters and Evan's sometimes more or less sensible comments. First they made him laugh, then they made him cry. It was the usual game of grief.

Eventually he embraced Barty, his arms both comfort and support. They held each other, a few minutes perhaps, while the draughty autumn wind blew through the harvested fields and made the grass rustle. Finally Barty loosened the embrace, held Regulus's face in both hands and gently wiped away his tears.

He told him many things, but not with words, only with his eyes. It didn't make Regulus any less sad, but it added something else to the feeling, something bittersweet. The certainty that they were both still here, despite everything that spoke against it. That they had found each other, despite everything that had happened. It was a gift, between all the hardships. A plea for forgiveness.

Barty leaned in and kissed him, continuing to caress his face. It was a soft kiss, only a few seconds, but it did not fail to have its effect. It awakened something in Regulus, something that rose from the heaviness, like the first bud from dust-dry desert soil. It felt warm, smoothed the edges of grief, made it less painful.

Regulus couldn't tell what it was. Not until Barty finally spoke it, the forbidden vow, the deceptive messenger of misfortune.

"I love you," Barty whispered as if he was sorry.

All his life, those words had been a mystery to Regulus. When James had said them to him, he hadn't been ready for it, had still been far too deep in the dark arts and all that he never really wanted to be.

But now, suddenly, they seemed to make sense. For the first time, really. Gave this warmth inside him a name, a definition, a purpose.

Love.

Something that grew even in the most hopeless, darkest places, even in the face of everything bad the world had to offer. An 'in spite of everything'. The end of a long journey.

"I love you too," Regulus replied, kissing him again.

And although the pain didn't stop, though grief and sorrow and fear still dwelled within him, Regulus was also filled with all-embracing

certainties:

He was no longer at the eternal end of his life, but merely at its beginning.

He had arrived.

He was in love.

And he was

finally

at peace.

Chapter End Notes

> Quote from 'Steppenwolf' by Hermann Hesse (from the very last page of the book. I love it so much. It helped me a lot.)

> That was Regulus's last chapter. I'm already getting emotional…

> See ya! ❤

Chapter 67: War of Hearts

Chapter Notes

CW Mentions of Addiction

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I can't help but love you

Even though I try not to

Sometimes,

Remus had been strange.

Perhaps it was the painful, unwanted sobriety that had increasingly haunted Sirius in recent weeks. Perhaps it was Remus's tear-streaked face over his paralysed body that followed him into every dream. Perhaps it was the heavy softness in his eyes with which he always regarded him since their return to the Order.

But the thought took root in him.

Sometimes, during that 15-month nightmare, there had been moments when Remus had been strange.

Not, 'evil' strange, not 'Death Eater' strange, but strange in a way that Sirius couldn't explain other than....

"Mr. Black? Are you still with us?" the therapist asked in an unpleasantly soft-spoken voice, bringing him back from his daydream. He looked up, saw the faces of five other sad figures sitting in a circle of chairs with him, illuminated by slightly flickering ceiling lights. At the sight, Sirius realised again why his mind had wandered.

"Sure thing," he muttered, rubbing his itchy eye.

"What can you contribute to the topic?"

"What topic?" Sirius showed no false shame at not having bothered to pay attention.

"What gives you strength? What helps you resist the urge to drink?"

Sirius toyed with the idea of just saying nothing, but then again had to think of Leo, who would only be disappointed if he knew he wasn't taking this group seriously.

"I don't know..." he mumbled therefore, his gaze fixed on the floor to escape the therapist's scrutinising eyes. "I have a few friends, I guess... Two of them had a baby, he's really cute... playing with him makes me happy... I think." He folded his hands in his lap. "And I play in a band, with people I like too..."

And sometimes I'm happy thinking about the boy I loved, before I remember that his mind has been tortured away.

"That sounds wonderful!" the therapist said exuberantly. "Mr Black has already touched on something very important: a stable social environment. In the struggle with addiction, one often feels quite alone. And this loneliness gives rise to destructive behaviour, a vicious circle. That's why it's very important to have loved ones around you to stand by you in those difficult moments..."

Remus had never actually been forced to do that. Put him to bed when he'd gotten drunk again. Hold him in his arms, calm him down, stroke his back when he had thrown up. But he had done it nevertheless.

Of course, it was easy and logical to assume that the parasite had simply done his job 100%. But 100% would have been less already, 100% would not have included kisses on his unsightly, chapped lips, or whispers o*f I'm here* and *Everything's going to be alright,* when he couldn't sleep.

And no matter how hard Sirius tried to push it away, that thought kept coming back to him.

"...Important point, Mr Graham, thanks for that!"

As the snippets of sentences filtered through to Sirius again, he realised that they had already moved on to an entirely different topic.

"Addiction never goes away, you're right. It is forever a companion. That's a realisation you really have to internalise. It is a part of us, but does not define us. We are more than the addiction."

"You're not what happens to you. You're not less because you've been hurt. You are you. You will always be you. And everything that seems lost will eventually come back."

It was still there, crystal clear in Sirius's mind. Back then on the balcony Remus had said this, in one of those strange moments. Remus had picked up the phrases from his mother, Sirius had come across them when he'd been rifling through the diary, in his darkest delusions, just after Godric's Hollow. But had that been intentional? Who had been speaking out of him? And why had he taken that extra step here, too, when less would have sufficed?

"...Thank you for your cooperation, we will continue next week at this point!" Short clapping, in which Sirius automatically joined in.

After that, the members of the group rose hesitantly, picked up their bags and jackets and immediately went on their way. Sirius, who was in no particular hurry to return to his dark, stuffy flat, took another mugful of the lukewarm pot of coffee.

He already suspected it, but of course the therapist did not miss this moment.

"How did you like the group, Mr Black?" she asked, cocking her head gently to one side.

"Oh quite well. Even managed to pick up a few things already." Busily, Sirius drank the coffee, already regretting having filled the mug all the way.

"I'm glad to hear that. I know it must be quite a lot at first, and there's also still a lot of inhibition about talking about your addiction. But I just want you to know that I don't want to push you into anything. If you'd rather just listen, that's perfectly fine with me."

"Yes, thank you," Sirius smiled, feeling a little bad now that he hadn't even been able to give her that. The problem was... how was he supposed to focus on himself when there was so much else going on right now that was gradually driving him out of his mind?

'I love you. I love you. I'm so sorry.'

It really wasn't easy.

***

"So how was it?" asked Leo excitedly, as soon as Sirius had entered the café. Sirius smiled bravely, took off his jacket and sat down across from him.

"Oh quite alright. Haven't said very much yet, more just letting it all sink in."

"The therapist is nice, isn't she?" Leo beamed at him. "A friend recommended her to me, I hear she has a lot of success stories."

"Yeah, she's very insightful," Sirius said distractedly as he glanced at the drinks menu.

"When's the next group?"

"Next Saturday. I don't know if I'm going yet though. My friends from London, Lily and James, want to have a little housewarming party. They've moved."

Leo looked less than enthusiastic. "Okay... But you really shouldn't neglect this."

"I know that," Sirius said reassuringly. "I'll keep going there."

That seemed to relieve him. "I know you've been in a better mood lately, but..."

"I won't take any chances." Sirius squeezed Leo's hand briefly. "I know

how hard you've been working on this. Thanks for that, really."

"You're welcome," Leo smiled weakly. "I'm just glad you're feeling better."

Without Leo, he might not even be sitting here. Sirius was glad he had finally swallowed his pride and apologised to him.

And as a part of his he deserved openness and honesty. As uncomfortable as it made Sirius feel.

"Remus will be there too," he said quietly.

Leo's eyes snapped open, his head jerking forward.

"Excuse me?"

Sirius didn't dare look him in the eye. "Most of my friends believe him, that he's changed, I mean... And he'll stay away from me."

Leo shook his head. "Sirius, you shouldn't expose yourself to him. That's his strategy to get back at you..."

The words were balm to the frightened little beast inside Sirius that had been screaming the exact same thing for weeks, every time he was forced to see Remus at Order meetings. But there was another voice too, an unyielding, unnerving one.

'I love you, I love you. I'm so sorry'

"I know that," Sirius murmured, sounding unconvinced by Leo's look.

"Please don't do anything rash, Sirius," he said seriously.

"I won't. I promise."

Sirius didn't hold his gaze for long. Hastily, he stood up and ordered another coffee.

***

Harry Potter was only 16 months old, but he already knew how to entertain a room full of people like no other. Ever since he had learned to walk, he never stopped, dashing through Lily and James's flat like a Bludger, taking tablecloths, unattended wands and cutlery with him. Babbling unintelligible words to himself, laughing heartily when anything rolled onto the floor and made the loudest possible noises. He was the literal definition of the word *alive*. Sirius loved him for it more than he could put into words.

"Siri!" he called out like he had been doing constantly for the last fifteen minutes as he hopped across the lawn of the back garden. He got two-thirds of his name right, after all.

"Towa!"

And like the last few times, Sirius followed Harry's command and waved his wand, making the colourful block tower build up all over again. Harry watched it excitedly and barely waited until the blocks were on top of each other before he brought the tower down again with a crude movement.

The blocks landed softly on the grass, but the muffled sound and the small clack when they met was enough noise to make Harry laugh exuberantly. He clapped his hands, hopped on the spot and almost choked on his own whoop. Sirius watched him do it, smiling.

"You should come more often. He likes you a lot."

Sirius looked around and saw Lily stepping out onto the sprawling terrace, her hands full of plates and saucers and her face flushed from the warmth inside.

"The kid gives me a lot of joy, too," Sirius admitted, and when Harry started croaking for the tower again, he waved his wand and kept him busy for the next few seconds.

"I'm glad to hear that," Lily said carefully, the dishes clattering lightly in her arms. "So if you'd like, I'm going to serve dessert now, Mary's already been loudly asking for it."

"Oh great, yeah, we'll be right back," Sirius said casually. He expected Lily to head back inside through the terrace door, but she still stood, hesitant.

"Hey, I know you said you wouldn't mind... But I really hope that's

okay, that he's here as well," Lily was speaking so quietly now that Sirius could barely hear her over Harry's laughter. "You know James is very grateful to him... but if you changed your mind and would rather not be in the same room as him, I can talk to ..."

"No, it's fine." Sirius sighed, and it came from way down deep. "I don't mind. After all, I see him all the time at Order meetings too, so I can handle it. The fronts are settled."

At least on the outside.

"All right then." Lily's voice sounded cautious. "If there's anything, please let me know."

"I will," Sirius said in a decidedly good mood and then finally heard Lily disappear back inside.

He didn't like lying, logically enough, he himself had suffered the most from it. But in this case he just couldn't help it. What was the point of telling Lily that Remus's mere presence was killing him? That he felt his every gaze on him, felt that every word he said was indirectly directed at him? If it hadn't been for this respite with Harry, he probably would have lost it by now.

He couldn't stay here forever, though, unfortunately. He built Harry a few more towers to push around before he realised he really had to go back in. It took some convincing and also a few tears of defiance from Harry, but finally the prospect of sugar tempted him and he stormed through the door towards the dining room. Sirius followed hesitantly, closing the door behind him and giving himself a quick shake as the comforting warmth enveloped him. It was an unusually mild November, but it was still November.

The dining room was well filled, at the long table on the left sat Alice and Frank Longbottom with little Neville, who was already tired and blinking idly. Next to them sat the pale Fabian Prewett, whom Mary, however, with all her finesse, sometimes managed to elicit a tired smile. Then, next to his own seat, James and Lily, who were about to put Harry in his chair and give him a small piece of the chocolate cake, then Peter and Grace, and next to them, engaged in shallow conversation with both of them, ...

Sirius averted his eyes and walked stubbornly towards his seat, taking a deep breath as he did so, trying not to listen to what Remus was saying.

Most of the others at the table seemed to have forgiven Remus. Sirius had accepted that. Peter was the nicest person in the world anyway, Sirius couldn't imagine him feeling anything like hatred at all. Mary was still reserved with Remus, but she too was slowly softening and Sirius kept seeing her talking to him. James had been completely convinced of Remus's story since he had saved his life and Lily... Sirius knew she probably felt very similarly.

Again, he was the exception. The bitter alcoholic who had been played the worst of everyone and yet everyone tacitly expected him to go along with the collective decision. Didn't complain when Remus sat at the table with them again, was allowed to laugh with them, after and despite everything that had happened.

"He's changed."

"It wasn't him *who killed all those people."*

"Remus has been through just as much as we have."

"He's broken free of Voldemort's spell, he's not a monster anymore."

"It's your Remus, Sirius. He is, you just have to give him the chance to prove it."

All those insistent voices, the many one-on-one conversations over the last few weeks, kept imposing themselves on him at such moments, trying to make him weak, to lull him. The problem was, each time they got a little louder.

He struggled through the next hour, ate some of the cake and drank three cups of tea. Watched James entertain Harry, listened to Mary's stories and finally helped Lily clear the table. All the while, he ignored Remus's looks, even though they burned on him like fire. He had decided to avoid any, really any, eye contact with him at all costs. Because that would do too much to him. And that in turn scared him.

At some point, as the afternoon was already entering its final throes and it was starting to get dark outside, Sirius finally couldn't stand it any longer and muttered a half-baked "I'm going to get some fresh air" before he had jumped up and escaped to the terrace once more. It was too early to say a polite goodbye to the party, but Sirius's nerves were shot anyway, so this was the only way not to lose his mind.

He sat down on the small, three-step staircase that led down from the terrace into the garden, where he had been sitting before. Unfortunately, in November, the garden didn't offer much more than wet grass and dark brown leaves, but in the face of the impending sunset, the light pink of the sky was enough to capture Sirius's attention. He leaned forward, crossed his arms in his lap and watched the clouds wander. A few minutes of peace.

But as always, it came to a quick end.

He felt his presence even before he heard him. Before his footsteps creaked on the wood of the terrace, before he lit his cigarette and the smoke travelled up Sirius's nose.

Sirius didn't turn around, didn't want to know how close he was to him, what he looked like, what he might be about to say. He pretended to keep watching the clouds, but his body was tense to the breaking point.

"Pretty balmy for November, isn't it?" he finally began, and Sirius was so tense that he had to laugh when he heard that unimaginative phrase. He didn't bother with an answer, though. If Remus had nothing else to say, he should fuck off. It would be the best for everyone.

The annoying thing about cigarettes, the classic filter cigarettes from the pack, was that they *dragged on*. Depending on how you smoked, you had up to 7 agonising minutes that just wouldn't go by. On top of that Remus smoked much more slowly than usual. And even when he finally finished, he just didn't disappear.

"What do you want?" nagged Sirius at one point, annoyed because it was getting too much for him. He was here to escape from this very situation.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Nothing in particular," Remus said, his voice sounding occupied. "Just talking to you. Hearing your voice."

"Not interested."

"You've been so quiet today, the whole time. It's because of me, isn't it?"

He didn't say it out loud. Just lowered his head and stared at the abandoned logs still lying in the grass.

Remus waited for an answer and even when he must have realised that none was coming, he still continued to wait. The gaze on the back of his neck like gallows. And it was doing things to him again. Things he couldn't control.

I love you, I love you. I'm so sorry.

I love you, I love you. I'm so sorry.

I love you, I love you. I'm so sorry.

"Why did you say that?" Sirius asked before he could stop himself.

"What do you mean?"

"That you love me. At the battle, when you thought I was dead."

"Because I do."

Sirius wanted to laugh again, but when he realised how seriously Remus was saying it, the laughter caught in his throat. He bit his lip.

"Wonderful," he scoffed bitterly. "And why should I ever believe another word you say?" He sounded more dismissive than he felt.

"I'm telling you the truth. I love you, Sirius." Sirius heard him come closer, step by step. He stared at the grass as if his life would end if he looked up. And when Remus finally took a seat beside him, a fair distance away, but still far too close, Sirius's breath caught.

I love you, I love you.

They stabbed like a knife into Sirius's chest, those three words. There had been a time when he would have done anything to hear them. But now, all they did was make him hurt.

"Then prove it to me."

Why did he say that? What was there to prove? What could ever convince Sirius? He was trapped, in a vicious circle with no escape.

I love you, I love you.

“Okay,” was all Remus said, taking a deep, shaky breath. Sirius watched out of the corner of his eye as he clutched his fingers in his jeans as if he was about to rip them apart.

"I'm sorry," Remus said then, as if to himself. Then he slid closer and Sirius felt a hand on his shoulder, gently turning him to the side. And then, before he could react, Remus kissed him.

It was only a brief touch. It was all he could do before Sirius rudely pushed him off and barked angrily, "What are you *doing*?! Are you out of your fucking mind?!"

Enraged, Sirius reached out with his hand and was about to slap him, but Remus reacted quickly, catching his hand and grabbing it by the wrist, holding it right next to his face.

"I'm sorry," was all he repeated, but his expression was determined.

Sirius tried to yank his hand away, but Remus's grip was rock solid and unyielding.

"Why won't you just leave me alone?" he asked weakly, the anger gone in one fell swoop.

"Because I love you."

"How many times are you going to say that?"

"Until you believe me."

The aching, hurt part of him extended its claws, wanted to scream at him '*Stop lying already!*', wanted to scratch, to bite, to break away from him forever. But that part was just as tired as the rest of Sirius. Just as desperate and sad and already under the spell of a deceptive, dangerous hope.

Sirius no longer resisted, but Remus still wouldn't let go of his hand. Brought it to his cheek instead, forcing Sirius to feel his skin, reddened by the November air, its pale warmth, its familiarity. Sirius stared at his hand as if hypnotised.

"Look at me," Remus whispered. "Please. Just once."

And Sirius, because he was weak and tired and desperate and so full of longing, obeyed.

I love you.

And he looked at him. Into his sad eyes, saw everything in them, everything that Sirius had denied him, had refused to admit to himself.

And then, before he realized what was happening,

he was the one leaning forward,

kissing Remus.

It was a hasty, desperate kiss, carried too much weight to have anything tender. And yet, it felt so familiar to Sirius that he soon had tears in his eyes. A kiss that felt almost like their first kiss, back when everything had been all right. One with emotion, fear, hope, with electric shocks running through him, making him feel alive for the first time in forever. Sirius closed his eyes.

He expected all-consuming chaos to break out inside him, hollering voices demanding him to come back to his senses, to not fall for his traps.

But there was nothing like that. Only *silence*.

Remus was the one leaning back again eventually, releasing Sirius's lips, gently stroking his cheek with his thumb, as he had always done in the past.

"That almost felt real," Sirius whispered, not yet daring to open his eyes again, too afraid, too vulnerable.

"It was," Remus replied quietly, wrapping both arms around Sirius and holding him tightly. Sirius felt him press his face into his shoulder, start muttering things, of which Sirius mostly only understood his name.

But the content of the words didn't matter. What was important were Remus's quivering shoulders, his trembling fingers clawing at Sirius's shirt, his tears wetting it. For a moment Sirius absorbed the sensations, finally opening his eyes and looking over Remus's shoulder at the sky where the sun was sending its last purple rays through the

darkness. His hands hovered a few inches above Remus's back, as if he might break him with a touch.

All those explanations, all those conversations, all those looks, nothing had been able to convince him. But this, Remus clinging to him, crying, begging his forgiveness, kissing him as if it meant something to him, this was it in the end. The final realisation.

Maybe his Remus really wasn't dead. Maybe he regretted his actions, maybe he wasn't even at fault.

Maybe he really did love Sirius.

A soft smile settled on Sirius's lips. And then he finally put his arms around Remus, returning the embrace, feeling his heartbeat, allowing gentle, loving thoughts for the first time in two years.

And in the end, I always find my way back to you. Because I just can't help it.

Because there is no life without you.

Because there is no me without you.

Forgiveness has never been an absolute. Sometimes it was a process, sometimes one that never ended.

Some things could not be forgiven, at least not completely. Some wounds were too deep, too life-changing. But sometimes you could break the resentment, the grudge, the pain into small pieces and throw away one piece at a time. And at some point, what was left was so small that it didn't hurt anymore.

Then you could step out of its shadow and see the sun again. Or in this case, Remus's eyes, along with all the love, the guilt, the suffering. He shared all that with Sirius and took some of his own burden in return. It was an equivalent exchange, a game, a responsibility, a promise.

That was how love worked.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'War of hearts' by Ruelle

I hope you liked it! :'*

Next chapter will be full of wolfstar, dears! we deserve it ❤

See ya!

Chapter 68: You Remind Me Of Love

Chapter Notes

CW Sexual Content (start and end marked with bold and underlined words so you can skip that part if you don't want to read it)

Sorry for the delay! A lot going on...
I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You remind me of love

I can see who you really are

You remind me of how it can be

Sirius was waiting for Remus in Hyde Park, near the Serpentine Lake. It was early afternoon, cool and grey, the ground off the paved roads muddy and soggy from the steady drizzle. Still, there was a lot going on, joggers, dog walkers, couples holding hands as they strolled along the shore. Sirius was barely visible in between, wearing a scarf and a long coat, his hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed on the murky surface of the water.

Remus approached him purposefully, doing his best to express self-assurance with his posture and body language, even though his heart was racing. The situation reminded him too much of their first reunion, in the park in Birmingham, where everything had gone so terribly wrong.

It's all right, Remus kept telling himself. *That's in the past. He's giving you another chance. He* kissed *you.*

He still couldn't believe it.

James and Lily's housewarming party had been two weeks ago and

everything that had happened after their reconciliation was already a blur in Remus's mind.

We need to talk, was the last thing he remembered Sirius saying, before they had let go of each other, had gone back inside and pretended that everything had not just changed fundamentally.

This was also the reason for them meeting now. *Talking*. What they should have been doing for weeks, for months. In peace, without hate, sadness, anger. As equals, maybe even as forgiven.

Sirius had chosen the place for it. Outdoors, neutral ground, side by side, rather than across from each other. It was probably the best choice to keep his mind as clear as possible.

He didn't recognise Remus until he was almost next to him. When he did, he quickly straightened and adjusted his scarf.

"Hey," he whispered, a mixture of anticipation and reluctance in his voice, their edges smoothed by a small smile.

"Hey." Remus stopped in front of him, a little uncertain.

Sirius let the awkward situation stand for a moment before he finally released Remus and carefully hugged him. He felt comforting warmth flow through him, though he was barely aware of Sirius's touch through their numerous layers of clothing.

They held the embrace for a moment and then broke away again, with Sirius lightly stroking his arm.

"Let's go?"

"Sure", Remus replied breathlessly.

They went on their way without touching each other, but so close that their shoulders were almost brushing. Every now and then, people jogged or rode past them on bicycles, but they didn't mind. Their gazes fixed on the grey, yet calming landscape, they began to talk.

Remus told everything, all the lies, the mistakes, everything that had been taken from him, everything he had recovered. He had told the story many times before, but always soberly, as concisely and matter-

of-factly as possible. This time, for the very first time, he spoke about his feelings, to the person who needed to hear them most. Sirius deserved to know all of the burden that Remus now carried on his conscience for the rest of his life.

The nervousness didn't help Remus stay stringent in his story. But Sirius was patient with him, didn't interrupt him, just helped him out when he lacked the right word or even all the words.

They walked slowly, without hurry. Circled almost the entire Serpentine until Remus had finally said everything he had wanted to say and fell silent.

"Thanks," was all Sirius said in the end. It was palpable that he was overwhelmed, but he did not seem angry or hurt, at least.

"Thank *you* for listening," Remus said, taking heart and taking Sirius's hand. He didn't push it away.

"That's what I'm here for." he sounded casual, but Remus knew it was mostly just an act. It surely was a lot to stomach.

"You want to tell me your story now? What you've been up to, how you ended up in Birmingham, how you met your new friends?"

Sirius squeezed his hand. "Some other time, okay? It's not a very happy story."

"Whenever you like."

For a while they were silent, walking side by side, holding hands, lost in their own thoughts. When they had finally reached their starting point again, Sirius stopped and Remus with him.

"I need to let all of this sink in for a bit... but would you like to meet up again next week?"

"Yes!" Remus blurted out. He would even single-handedly alter the lunar cycle itself if it got in the way of him seeing Sirius again.

"Okay, same time, same place?"

"Sure." Remus turned to him, taking a step closer. "Looking forward to it."

"Me too," Sirius smiled, his gaze heavy from all the thoughts that lay in it.

Before Remus had the chance to get reckless, Sirius was hugging him again, tender and soft.

The embrace was longer than the first, more deliberate. And when Sirius carefully stepped away from him again, he brushed Remus's cheek with his lips as if by chance, leaving a fleeting kiss that spread like a warm wave through his body and made him forget the cold December day for a moment.

Strange that this small gesture triggered so much in him, after they had already kissed at James and Lily's flat. But back then it had been an exceptional situation, a fever dream, desperation running rampant. Now they were back in reality, at the beginning of a cautious reconciliation, a rapprochement. Remus knew they had to take it slowly.

Sirius blinked at him and then lowered his gaze, looking down at his jacket.

"I'll see you then?"

"Of course."

They took another step back, gave each other a final smile and said goodbye.

Remus strolled a few steps behind a tree and disapparated back into the hut, unseen. Before he went to report to Regulus, however, he looked at the weathered front door and took a moment to realise how well the meeting had gone. It filled his heart to the brim, made him smile so broadly that his cheeks hurt.

It help him ignore the small, nagging voice in his head.

***

The second meeting was almost identical to the first. Remus picked up Sirius, who was waiting patiently for him, they hugged and went on their way. The only differences were that this time it was snowing heavily and that Sirius was the one to take Remus's hand.

After a while Sirius began to talk about his last two years, albeit

hesitantly. Talked about his Muggle friends, his band and the continuous attempt to find salvation in alcohol. About psychological addiction, and how much work it was for him to not fall back into bad habits.

All these things weighed on Remus's conscience, made him so sad that he couldn't find any words. For a moment he was caught up in thoughts of a lost, broken Sirius, who had had to deal with all of this alone, for so long. They reminded him once again of the extent to which he had harmed him and everybody else in his life.

Sirius seemed to sense his distress, paused and looked at him indulgently.

"It's okay, Remus. It's over, isn't it? I'm out of my slump."

He shook his head miserably. "But not because of me." *I was the one pushing you into it.*

Sirius smiled bravely and squeezed his hand.

"We were both struggling with our demons. You were trapped as much as I was. I'm just glad we both overcame them."

That Sirius would one day be the one to justify all his terrible deeds. It just made everything worse.

Remus blinked several times, but it didn't help with the sudden burning in his eyes.

"Sirius, I'm *so* terribly-"

He shook his head sternly. "Don't. You've apologised enough already. We're not on the terrace anymore, so let's close this chapter, okay?"

Remus felt inconsolable, but he pressed his lips together and nodded.

Sirius went ahead and led him on, along the Serpentine, through snow that kept falling.

***

It took a few weeks until they saw each other for the third time. In between lay Christmas and Remus's first mission with the werewolves.

The latter turned out to be a real challenge, but the mere thought of seeing Sirius again a few days afterwards made him get through it.

When they met again at the Serpentine, on a dry but bitterly cold January day, Sirius pointed to the new scar on his cheek.

"Bad full moon?"

And as they began their walk, Remus told him about his deal with Dumbledore.

There was something ironic about the fact that he had now started doing what he had been lying to Sirius about for months. But he didn't seem particularly bothered by it.

"It's good that someone finally cares about them," was all he said. "This whole situation is really dangerous."

Remus went on to tell him about his first encounters with angry teenagers and bitter, long-time outcasts.

At the end, Sirius only smiled affectionately. "You're doing a really good thing."

And that alone made Remus feel like all of the struggles were worth it.

This little exchange marked the beginning of their happiest meeting yet. They laughed a lot, even over little things, and Remus almost forgot about the smouldering sense of remorse that overcame him every time he looked at Sirius.

At one point they even casually entered forbidden territory, the time before 1979. Sirius seemed surprised that Remus could remember a few things, if only dimly. A few situations, a few snippets, his frantic visions and dreams had brought him back by now, though they were never satisfactory. But that became their little game for the rest of their walk. Remus would describe a situation he could remember and Sirius would then fill in the blanks, tell him the background, what exactly had happened and how things had progressed.

Remus wasn't even that interested in the background or the story, but only in the faces Sirius made, the way his cheeks lit up with excitement, the way his eyes sparkled when he remembered the funny or stupid moments from school. It was all he needed.

Far too quickly they had finished their round and had almost arrived back at the starting point. Sirius slowed his steps and Remus automatically with him.

"What do you think about meeting somewhere else next time?" he asked without looking at Remus.

"What do you have in mind?" Remus tried to sound casual.

"Oh, we could go out for dinner or something? Or to the cinema. I haven't been in a while."

"The second Mad Max is on right now I believe."

"Really?" Sirius wheeled around excitedly and looked at Remus with bright eyes. "Oh, we definitely have to go see it!"

"I know *exactly* why you want to see that one," Remus laughed, briefly considering whether he should be jealous of Mel Gibson.

"It's the leather jacket," Sirius admitted, grinning broadly. Remus noticed for the first time the little laugh lines forming around his eyes. They looked so beautiful that his heart leapt.

Out of a sudden impulse, he pulled Sirius towards him by the hand, leaned forward and kissed him.

His lips felt cool at first, but still soft and perfect. For a second Remus feared that he was crossing a line, but then Sirius gently laid his hands on his back, returning the kiss. It was slower than the one at James's and Lily's. Much more cautious and gentle, like a first, shy approach after a first date. It was all Remus would risk or even allow himself right now.

He placed his hand on the side of Sirius's neck, twirling his silky hair between his fingertips. Feeling Sirius's warm breath on his face, and his heartbeat thumping wildly in his ears. For a moment, everything was good.

***

At their next meeting, they did see Mad Max 2 at the cinema, and even though Sirius fell into a similar gush as in the first one, he still

had enough interest in Remus afterwards to go out to dinner with him and talk about the film in detail.

"I thought it was better than the first one."

"Really?" Remus raised his eyebrows. "I thought the plot was even more harebrained somehow."

Sirius rolled his eyes "No one watches these movies for the plot."

He laughed. "True again. The action was crazy."

"My ears are still ringing."

Over the next few minutes they tried to decipher the more or less subtle allusions to the real world and it struck Remus that Sirius by now seemed to know more about the Muggle world than he did.

The realisation made him pause for a moment. As they sat there, in a Muggle restaurant, philosophising about an action movie and drinking cola, you'd almost think they'd never been anyone but that. Never fought in a war, never got hurt or betrayed. For a moment he wallowed in it, and that little what-if laid like a balm on Remus's scarred soul. How beautiful their lives would have been without all this. How easy.

After a few minutes of bliss, the guilty conscience inevitably returned. Was it acceptable for him to just overlook it like that? To pretend to be a good person?
Sirius, looking at him tenderly and his hand laying on his, seemed somehow able to do it.

After all the meetings over the last few weeks, there was nothing left of the reticence or insecurity in his eyes. He just looked at him, full of affection, full of *love*. As if he had really forgiven him.

Once again, he was a better person than Remus would ever be.

He pushed the realisation aside, intertwined their fingers on the table and tried to look at Sirius as if he deserved him. Took the small, ideal bubble they were sitting in and put himself in the mind game that they were really just innocent Muggles in love, on a date and discovering the first shoots of their passion.

It led to Remus getting reckless and stupid, eventually taking Sirius outside, into a small, unfrequented side street and gently pressing him

against a wall. It was simple, just two people in love getting close. Remus leaned against Sirius, lifted his chin with his finger and forgot himself somewhere between Sirius's dark eyes and his hot lips.

It was only when he heard Sirius's stifled gasp against his ear that he woke up again. He realised that he was kissing Sirius's neck, had opened his coat. That he had his hands under his shirt and a knee between his legs.

Abruptly, he let go of him and took a step back. With eyes wide he stared at Sirius, who was blinking at him in confusion.

"What's wrong?" he whispered, his voice rough, his cheeks flushed.

"I'm sorry," Remus whispered, shaking his head frantically.

"What are you sorry for?", Sirius hastily adjusted his shirt and pushed himself off the wall.

Remus couldn't find the right words, couldn't even really put a name to all that was racing through his head.

For not being able to control myself, for being so fucking selfish, for even daring *to touch you like that...*

"Come here," Sirius said before his thoughts could get out of control. He gently put Remus's head down on his shoulder and stroked his back. As if he seemed to know exactly what the problem was, and as if he still didn't care that Remus didn't deserve him at all.

"The fact that you're reacting like this just shows that you're another person now, doesn't it?" whispered Sirius, somehow reading his thoughts, allowing his innermost fears to come out.

With words like these he managed to calm Remus down again, although he didn't stop feeling miserable. They held onto each other for a while before letting go and walking on, hand in hand, with no destination, just together.

Remus realised that Sirius wasn't the only one who still had a long way to heal.

***

They didn't talk about Remus's fit of guilt afterwards. They just continued to meet, to do deliberately light activities, to walk, to go ice-skating or even to one of those arcades that seemed to have sprung up lately. They continued to kiss, too, even though Remus forced himself to hold back so as not to wreck what they were just starting to rebuild.

Sirius was still warm and affectionate, though growingly preoccupied. More and more Remus noticed him looking at him from the side, but couldn't quite interpret his gaze. It was starting to make him a little nervous.

He took his observations with him into the next full moon, using the distance the transformation brought him to think about it extensively. But even after he had returned to the hut, completely scratched and exhausted, he had made no progress with it. He only realised that he started missing Sirius increasingly desperately, longed for him with every inch of his body, and could hardly stand to be away from him any longer.

And that was really dangerous.

The morning before the next meeting was a dark, cold, rainy day where thick drops pattered on the windows. At some point these were replaced by the beak of a drenched owl, which knocked frantically and aggressively, almost giving Remus a heart attack.

After he had opened the window, it shook itself out, sprinkling Remus with raindrops and looking just as dazed as he was. It was still strange to him that their hut could now be found by owls after they had released all the protection spells. They weren't that secluded now after all.

The owl held out a leg to Remus, to which was tied a wondrously dry letter. He took the letter, saw that it was addressed to him and immediately recognised Sirius's neat handwriting. Excitedly, he opened the letter and read.

Remus,

Since you idiots still don't have a telephone, this way.

I suggest we move today's meeting to my place in Birmingham, the weather isn't so nasty here. Just pick me up at my flat and we'll see on the fly.

Looking forward to seeing you.

Sirius

When Remus looked up again, the owl had apparently braced itself sufficiently for the rain once more and set off with a wild flutter. He watched it swoop through the window into the sky.

Looking forward to seeing you.

***

As it turned out, the weather in Birmingham was just as shitty as in London. The cloud front had moved on to the northwest and it took Remus only a few seconds to be completely soaked after apparating.

He hurried to Sirius's flat, the first time he would actually visit it. It was on the second floor of a block, not so dissimilar to his father's. Remus had suspected that Sirius was already waiting for him at the bottom of the stairwell, but he saw no one.

He pressed the bell with Sirius's name on it and a few seconds later he was finally safe from the rain. Much like the owl in the morning, he shook himself, ran a hand through his damp hair and let out a sighing breath almost like an old grumpy grandpa.

He climbed the stairs but found the door to Sirius's flat still closed. Cautiously, he knocked. He was a little curious to see how he lived now, whether his soul shone through as clearly in the current flat as it had in their old one.

It took much longer this time than downstairs for Sirius to budge. When the door finally opened in front of him, Remus put on a smile and started:

"Hey! I hope you've got some umbrellas, the weather's a complete

cata..." He fell silent when he caught sight of Sirius. Not because he looked bad or sick, but because he was wearing sweatpants, had damp hair and conveyed with all of his attitude that he wasn't ready to go anywhere.

"Er, am I early?" asked Remus, looking at his wristwatch. He was actually five minutes late. Confused, he looked up again.

"Don't you feel like going?"

For a second his thoughts went on an anxious merry-go-round, thinking back to drinking escapades and mistakes committed. But one look into Sirius's eyes told him that none of that was the case. His eyes were clear. And fixed unblinkingly on Remus.

"Come in," he said calmly, unmoved by his confusion.

All further questions stuck in Remus's throat. Hesitantly he followed the invitation, stepped over the threshold into a small hallway and looked around. It seemed quite dark and cramped, but a first glance revealed that it was very tidy. And it smelled so much like Sirius that he felt intoxicated for a moment.

Sirius closed the door behind him, taking some more brightness out of the hallway. Remus turned to him, tried again with a smile.

"Do you want to show me your fla..." and was interrupted again. This time not by the sight of Sirius, but by his mouth.

Before Remus realized what was happening, Sirius had a hand on the back of his neck, pulled his head down and kissed him. Everything he had wanted to say disappeared into his subconscious, completely obliterated. Reflexively, Remus returned the kiss, sinking one hand into Sirius's damp hair and putting the other arm around his waist.

He smelled of shampoo and tasted of temptation. And at the latest, when Sirius purposefully relieved Remus of his jacket, deepening the kiss and pressing further against him, he understood what his plan had been all along.

The realisation drove his pulse up. The combination of Sirius's smell in his nose, his hands going under his shirt and the feeling of his tongue slipping in his mouth threatened to sweep him away. But he couldn't let that happen, that was so fucking dangerous, this was absolutely...

"Don't hold back," Sirius whispered between heated kisses, "Just let

yourself go."

And show me everything of you.

The thought alone scared him. He was absolutely convinced that the moment he would let himself go and show his damaged, ugly self to Sirius, that he would recoil from him, run away and never come back.

"But...", Remus tried to get out, but Sirius seemed determined not to let him complete a single sentence. He swallowed every other syllable, every ounce of doubt, before he finally released his lips, leaned his forehead against Remus's and gently stroke his chest.

"I know you're scared, but you don't have to be. Let it go. Let me help you."

Did he even realise how fucked up this all was? How bad Remus was for him? How much he would probably hurt him again?

Sirius kissed him again, relentless, drowning even his thoughts. Remus couldn't withstand it for long. As much as he struggled with himself, as much as he was afraid of the end, he *wanted* this too. So much that he was nearly bursting. He ached for Sirius so, so unbearably. There was no escape from it.

He stumbled out of his shoes, letting Sirius guide him towards the bedroom. And as they entered, Remus dived into a world where there was nothing but Sirius. Nothing but his all-encompassing need to touch him, to hold him, to *love* him.

Maybe it would be his liberating blow.

Or maybe it would be his downfall.

Remus flipped the coin.

They got rid of their clothes in no time. As if hypnotised Remus let Sirius push him onto the narrow bed, sat astride him, bring their already red-kissed lips together again. Remus's field of vision narrowed, but he still felt clearer than he had in a long time. The world could be so simple, so bearable. If it only consisted of *him*.

Of Sirius, who broke their kiss again after a moment of weightless oblivion, and sat up a little. Who was looking at him between strands

of pitch-black hair, his cheeks flushed, his lips blood-red and slightly parted, as he slowly started moving against his crotch. Whose movements were so agonisingly slow, that it left Remus completely breathless and craving more.

As if touching a treasure of inestimable value, he ran his fingers over Sirius's lean torso. It had changed, lost muscles and gained tattoos, but it still felt so familiar, warm and inviting, begging to be worshipped. Remus's fingers were still cold from the outside, so they left a trail of goosebumps on his skin. When he reached his nipples and teasingly circled them, Sirius stifled a gasp.

"I want you," He breathed as if to reassure Remus. It was kindly meant, but also dangerous, threatening to remind him of what they were about to do.

Before any of it could find its way into his mind, he grabbed Sirius's shoulders and pulled him down again.

They kissed, as if they wanted to make up for every single mistake, as if the world would end if they stopped. Remus's senses were overstimulated, overwhelmed, by the warm body that nestled against him and fanned his body heat. Slowly his hands wandered to Sirius's lower back, guiding his torturous movements, pressing their hips together even more.

It didn't take long until Remus was hard, and had to break the kiss to catch his breath. Sirius watched him with dark eyes, licking over his lips. He released one hand from him and reached for something out of his sight, placing it on the bed beside them. A quick glance to the side showed Remus that it was a bottle of lube.

He understood the silent request, grabbed the lube and put some on his fingers. They slid further onto the bed so that Remus was leaning against the headboard of the bed with his upper body slightly up, while Sirius stripped off his last layer of fabric and sat on top him again, leaning forward so that Remus could easily position his fingers.

He stole another long drawn out kiss from Sirius before slowly pushing his first finger in. Sirius held his breath for a second, holding onto Remus's shoulders, before exhaling shakily, and nodding. Remus began to move, slowly and carefully, until the grip on his shoulders eased. Then he added a second finger.

Once Sirius got used to that as well, Remus became more brisk, curling his fingers and searching, until Sirius finally shivered and a

load moan escaped his lips.

As if startled by himself, Sirius pressed his mouth shut again, but Remus only shook his head and continued to aim for the exact same spot. He did until Sirius had shed his false shame and his moans accompanied the lewd sounds of his fingers thrusting into him.

"Enough...now," Sirius got out eventually, his gaze clouded, his hair dishevelled. "I'm ready."

"Okay," Remus breathed, yanked his own pants down and freed his already throbbing erection. Hastily, he put lube on it before grabbing it and replacing his fingers.

Even as he entered him just with the tip, it felt so overwhelming that Remus couldn't help a soft "*fuck*...". With a shaky exhale, he pushed it in further, all the way in, until he and Sirius were shaking from the mere sensation.

"Shit," Sirius joined in, and after a deep breath straightened up, only bringing them closer together. Gently he put his head back, propped his hands on Remus's torso and slowly began to move. Remus watched him do it, completely mesmerised by the sight of Sirius on top of him and the way he felt around his cock, letting himself sink on it, again, again and again...

He grabbed Sirius's waist with one hand to guide his movements, grasped his cock with the other and began to move his hand to his rhythm. Sirius's eyes closed fluttering and he only quickened, threatening to drive Remus completely out of his mind.

Everything in Remus roared, everything was filled with Sirius, there was not a fibre of his body with which he did not desire this man, did not want to consume him skin and hair. That he was here, that he was allowed to experience this again, it was more than he could have ever dreamed of.

If the price for this was madness, Remus was willing to pay it.

Reverently his hand moved up from Sirius's hip and traced the curve of his waist, which felt heated, covered in a light film of sweat. He wasn't able to think clearly, now that his deepest desires had taken over. But in the midst of the haze, in the midst of the steady, aimless movements, he could still silently worship what he had in front of him, what he felt beneath his fingers, what had surrendered to him. It was his small salvation.

Sirius's head slumped forward again, biting his swollen lip, his stifled moans hanging in the heavy air. The moment their eyes met again Remus realised he wouldn't last much longer. It was too much, Sirius was too much.

"I'm...," Remus hissed and Sirius nodded, leaning down and kissing him hastily.

He continued to work Sirius's cock, began pushing his hips upwards to meet his movements, thrusting into him even deeper. Sirius, still bent forward over him, gasped loudly against his ear and, with his whole body tensing, came into his hand. Remus himself was too close to his own orgasm to slow down. Hard and fast he met Sirius's out of rhythm movements and finally came too, with a shuddering moan.

The tension remained for a few more seconds. His whole body felt the electricity coursing through him, and he savoured the sensation. It was the best feeling in the world.

As their quivering bodies came to rest, Remus tried to regain his senses. Sirius laid himself onto him, his hot breath on the crook of his neck, his hair covering half of his face. Remus wiped the strands away from his mouth and nose and took a few deep breaths before he tenderly stroked Sirius's back.

"**Are you alright?**" he whispered into Sirius's ear, kissing it gently.

"Yes," he breathed back and after a brief moment of silence, he added, "Are *you* okay?"

Right now? "More than that", he replied.

In a few minutes? We'll see.

Sirius rose from Remus, dropped heavily into the pillow beside him and wiped small beads of sweat from his forehead.

For a while they just lay like that, both on their back, looking at the ceiling and listening to their own breathing. There was something really comforting about it.

Sirius was the first to break the silence as he rose and disappeared into the bathroom to freshen up. Remus waited until he had finished before he followed suit and took the opportunity to splash cold water

on his face and look at himself in the small bathroom mirror. His cheeks were still flushed and he looked dishevelled, but also incredibly *alive*. It was like seeing a completely new person. Someone Sirius somehow still wanted to be with. Despite the scars, inside and out.

He returned to the bedroom, where Sirius had already settled back into bed, his upper body leaned to the side, his gaze fixed on the empty windowsill. Remus lay down beside him, slipped an arm between Sirius's waist and the mattress and hugged him from behind.

Just as he had settled into position, their legs entwined and Sirius's warm body against his, Sirius turned his head and blinked at him, softly, sleepily. Remus leaned in so that he could kiss him gently, as an accentuated counterpart to the passion of a few minutes ago.

And after kissing, and then lying in their embrace for a few minutes, Sirius eventually turned and looked at him pleadingly.

"Do you want to stay until tomorrow, maybe?"

Perhaps in the end it was this question that kept Remus's demons from coming back that day.

***

They didn't stay in bed much longer, wanting to make the most of the rest of the day, as short as it was in the winter. After the rain had eased a little, they went outside, to the supermarket, where they bought ingredients for dinner and a few things for Remus to stay overnight.

When they were back and had put everything away, Sirius officially showed him the flat for the first time, even though Remus had seen almost every room by then. It was modest, a small city flat for a maximum of two people, but Sirius seemed to really take care of it. He also proudly displayed his new phone in the hallway and an even newer television in the living room, which Remus only commented on with an appreciative whistle.

After he had also examined the balcony and had his much needed cigarette, they set about cooking dinner. Remus started chopping vegetables while Sirius, to his delight, plugged in his old record player

and put on a Van Halen record.

"We never got to go to their concert," Remus sighed, dumping the chopped onions and shallots into a bowl.

"Oh, right, I completely forgot about that!"

Remus had given him concert tickets for Christmas in 1979, which they had never redeemed. Even though that was barely two years ago, it felt like another lifetime.

It was, in a way.

"We can try again," He said, and Sirius blew him a kiss as he passed.

"Definitely. If you can even get tickets now. They have pretty much gone through the roof by now."

"I'm sure." And if Remus had to camp outside the ticket booth.

To the sound of Eddie Van Halen's guitar solos, they prepared dinner and decided not to squeeze into the small corner table in the kitchen, but to eat in the living room where Sirius showed Remus the wonders of television and the BBC. They ate and watched a sitcom called The Last Song, which Remus found himself unwillingly intrigued in.

Just as he was about to get upset with the main character Leo Bannister and his stupid decisions, the phone rang. As it turned out, a different Leo.

"Hey, Leo, what's up?" asked Sirius. He was standing in the hallway, just within Remus's field of vision. Remus turned down the volume on the television.

"Yes, everything's fine. You?... Mhm. Yeah sure no thing... No, don't worry, I'm fine..." Sirius gave Remus a caught sideways glance. "No... listen, do you want to meet up for a bit afterwards? I need to talk to you... ...I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, okay? Have a nice evening. And good luck with your studies. Bye."

He hung up and took a deep breath.

"I'm telling you, the guy's got a sixth sense or something." Sirius plopped back down on the couch and didn't touch his food again. "It's like he senses you're here."

"Does he know we're...?" Remus didn't even know how to end the sentence.

"No," Sirius said with a visibly guilty conscience. "But I'm going to tell him tomorrow. He's going to kill me."

"Does he hate me that much?" Remus thought back to that unfortunate night at the pub where Leo had seen him at his worst.

"Yeah. He thinks you're a criminal or some shit. I don't blame him, he just wants me to be safe. And what I've told him about you so far... probably doesn't allow for any other attitude."

"How are you going to convince him without telling him the whole truth?"

Sirius shrugged and leaned back on the sofa, exhausted. Remus pushed his plate away and did the same, putting an arm around his shoulders and hugging him.

"This is going to be an fucking awful conversation."

Remus rubbed his upper arm encouragingly. "You can do it."

Sirius leaned his head against Remus and looked into the flickering screen of the television, even though it was still turned down too low to really hear what was happening.

"It makes me really happy to be with you," Sirius whispered out of nowhere and it shook Remus to the core.

"I'm glad." he replied hoarsely.

"I didn't mean to overwhelm you earlier..." Sirius paused, "But I just wanted to show you that... it's *okay*, you know? Everything's alright. We've fought enough. And I'm sure you're tired too."

"Yes." *Infinitely.* But the thing with thoughts and doubts was that they could keep going even when there was no strength left. If they wanted to, they kept going until they completely destroyed you.

"I just want you to know that I won't leave. No matter what happens, I will stay."

Remus felt his breath catching. "Thank you."

I don't deserve you.

"And another thing." Sirius hesitated. Then, with his gaze lowered, he went on. "I want you to know that I'm sorry too."

Remus froze. "Sorry for what?"

"Everything you've been through... and still have to go through", Sirius looked sorrowful. "You've done terrible things. But terrible things were done to you, too. What Voldemort did is unforgivable. I'm so sorry I let that happen... I should have protected you."

Before his eyes could betray him, he turned to the side and hugged Sirius properly, staring at the beige wallpaper behind the couch.

"No one is to blame for what happened to me, except Voldemort. And he got his just deserts. The only thing that is important now for me is to try to make up for everything that I did." He bit his lip. "I want to be worthy of your forgiveness."

"Remus", Sirius said, his voice occupied, "You have to learn to forgive *yourself* first."

Remus was glad that Sirius could not see his face. He stared at the wall as if his life depended on it, feeling his hands starting to tremble.

Forgive yourself.

Forgive my*self.*

They didn't let go of each other for the rest of the evening. Went to bed together, snuggled up to each other and it wasn't long before Sirius's eyes fell shut and his breathing slowed down. Remus tried to stay awake for a few more minutes, thinking about what Sirius had said.

He was right, he had seen through it. It was the reason why he was not truly happy, even though he had Sirius back. It was the reason why he found it so difficult to allow closeness and affection. He had

felt that something was wrong, but he hadn't quite realised the very root of the problem.

Now he knew.

And as he stared into nothingness, his heart grew heavy. Heavy with regret, with frustration at all the black holes smouldering inside him and the work it would take to fix them. It felt like a lifetime's work, a gigantic, painful, never-ending agony. The real, final punishment.

Just as Remus was about to slip into this darkness, Sirius put his arm across his chest, his eyes still closed. And casually, like a little farewell to the land of dreams, he whispered.

"I hope I'm dreaming of you."

The darkness vanished.

"And I hope it's a nice dream," Remus replied softly.

"Of course," Sirius breathed, barely audible. "It would be about someone I love."

And at this very moment, with Sirius in his arms and love in his heart, Remus felt free. No fear, no dead faces, no guilt.

At this very moment he knew that everything would be all right.

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: ‘Du erinnerst mich an Liebe/You remind me of love’ by Ich + Ich

Epilogue will be up in the coming week. We’ve almost reached the end...
Thank you for everything, dears ❤

See ya!

Chapter 69: Everything Was Beautiful And Nothing Hurt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So fast

that last year feels like yesterday

So much bad

that I almost forgot the best part

Hope my last sentence

when the end is near and I'm gone:

"Everything was beautiful

and nothing hurt"

June 1984

Peter was marrying into a *very* wealthy family, as Remus and Sirius discovered on the big day. They took a moment to marvel as they entered the wedding venue, the large hall decorated in white and gold, the flying candlesticks, the huge, vibrant rose bushes that seemed to grow steadily. Even the cutlery was gold, as were the engraved cups and plates and the embroidery on Grace's train.

"Wow," Sirius made, letting his gaze wander around the room in perplexity. "Pete could have told us about his beloved being *that* rich."

Remus chimed in with an appreciative whistle, but was mostly content to watch Sirius from the side instead of the decoration. His hair was tied halfway back and shone silkily in the light, his dark suit fitted him like a glove. Beside him, everyone else looked pale and colourless. At least that was Remus's impression. Perhaps it was also the only one that did him justice.

"What's wrong?" Sirius smiled at him when he noticed him staring.

"Nothing," Remus replied casually, grabbing his hand and pointing to one of the round tables where cards were set up with their names on them. "Let's sit down."

It was a large wedding with over a hundred guests. Most were from Grace's family, mostly elderly, traditionally dressed witches and wizards with lots of jewellery on their clothes and serious, wrinkled looks. Peter had invited, in addition to his manageable family, the Order, which by now existed only on paper, but still held together more closely than ever. They shared two tables very close to Peter and Grace and Remus was glad to have some familiar faces around him.

"I won't even dare to get the cutlery dirty, the way it shines," Mary quipped, sitting opposite Remus and Sirius.

"What's on this table is probably worth more than everything I will ever own," Fabian retorted and Lily next to him chuckled.

"I've got my eye on you, Niffler," James jokingly interjected in Fabian's direction, watching Harry present his magical driving toy cars to an impressed Neville.

Remus smiled to himself and glanced at the next table, where other Order members were sitting. Dorcas, who had come all the way from Argentina, a beautiful woman with long brown curls at her side, next to Moody, grumpy as usual, and Regulus and Barty, who apparently could not quite believe that they had been invited.

Remus gripped the tabletop, leaned back in his chair so that he was balancing on two chair legs, and whispered a quick, "Glad you're here!" to them.

It wasn't often that the two of them were seen at such events, as they lived a very secluded life. Remus was a regular and welcome guest, but that seemed to be enough for them in terms of contact with the Order and most of the outside world. After everything that had happened and how some people still thought of them, it was understandable.

"Likewise," Regulus winked at him.

"You look well," Barty added, grinning. Remus stuck his tongue out at

him suggestively, deliberately presenting his not-quite-healed black eye. Unfortunately, working in werewolf packs still wasn't without its dangers.

Peter interrupted their exchange as he stood on a small podium against the long wall of the hall, officially welcomed all the guests in a magically amplified voice and announced the following programme. He was terribly nervous and fumbled a few times, but all the guests were patient. Their encouraging smiles seemed to help him.

Then they ate, first starters then mains and at the end there was a small formal part, similar to James and Lily's wedding. There the best men spoke, including James for Peter. He did great, as expected, emphasising their years of friendship, to the point where Peter burst into tears and hiccupped wildly while James patted him on the back. Sirius beside him also blinked strained a few times. Remus squeezed his hand under the table.

He let the rest of the programme pass by, content and happy. Cake cutting, dessert, smaller games, opening dance. It was a wonderful buzz in which Remus was only too happy to lose himself in. Of course, like every time, he felt the barely hidden stares on him, but he ignored them. It was getting easier as time passed.

After the dancing had begun, it became a little quieter at the tables. Neither Sirius nor Remus felt the urge to join it yet, preferring to watch James slowly loosen up around the shoulders through his first cups of Honeymet, or Dorcas swinging her girlfriend virtuously through the hall.

At one point, on the edge of the crowd, they saw Peter catch his breath red-cheeked and talking to a tall, blond man.

"Ohh!" made Sirius excitedly when he caught sight of the man. "Is that Declan?" His eyes lit up. "I haven't seen him in ages!" He nudged Remus excitedly and pointed at him. "We really must go say hello to him!"

Remus looked at the wizard with the prominent nose and searched his mind for memories of him. However, all he found was old familiar resignation.

"You'd better do that on your own," Remus smiled thinly and Sirius understood immediately.

"Sorry," he said, and his excitement seemed to collapse in on itself.

"Oh nonsense!" Remus waved it off. "But feel free to give me a quick summary, maybe something will ring a bell."

"That's Declan Greenford, he was from our year, Ravenclaw. Bloody good beater, he gave us a few nasty knockdowns. Right proper bloke, though."

That didn't ring a bell. "Thanks." Remus watched as Sirius's gaze kept wandering to Declan and nudged him.

"Come on, get over there before you lose sight of him again," he grinned. "I was just going for a smoke anyway."

That prompted Sirius's meaningful look.

"Don't worry," Remus blew him a kiss on the cheek. "It will be the only one today. Promise."

"I should hope so. Be a shame about your new suit, too, if you stink all over it."

Remus just smiled and they rose together.

Besides the big main entrance, there was also a side entrance that led to an extensive rose garden, which was mainly intended for wedding photos and which Remus chose for his cigarette of the day. He had sworn to Sirius that he would finally quit, but it wasn't quite working out yet. Someday, for sure. At least he was on the right track.

There was hardly anything going on outside, just a few lone people cooling off and, as expected, Regulus and Barty laughing their heads off at a story Barty was telling.

"Make sure Sirius doesn't catch you!" sniggered Regulus as he saw Remus pull out his packet.

"He already knows," Remus waved it off and lit the cigarette.

"I haven't seen you on the *dance floor* yet."

"Admit it, you just want to see me suffer."

He blew the smoke into the air and looked up at the sky. It was a beautiful evening, hardly a cloud to be seen. He tried not to think too hard about the thing with Declan.

"Didn't mean to make fun of your injuries earlier, by the way," Barty

said, probably because Regulus had told him to. "Hope you didn't have too much stress on your last mission?"

Remus shrugged. "It was okay. I'm almost done by now. Maybe another three months, then I can leave the packs to their own devices."

"That sounds good," Regulus said, sounding relieved. "Sirius will be pleased."

"You better believe it." Remus could hardly imagine what life would be like when they could finally be together consistently, even across the full moon. It was the last thing standing in the way of their peace.

Remus finished his cigarette and the moment he threw the stub away, Sirius came out and took a deep breath.

"Pretty hot in there," he puffed and joined them. Remus noticed Regulus tense up. But it was getting a little less each time.

"Have you been talking to Declan?" asked Remus before an uncomfortable silence could fall. "What's he up to?"

"Yeah, the guy really wants to make a career. Was exhausted just listening to him," Sirius smiled. "But he's still nice."

"That's good..." The not-thinking thing wasn't really going to work.

Out of the corner of his eye, Remus saw Barty and Regulus exchange a quick glance.

"I think we'll head back inside," Regulus said casually and, after a moment's hesitation, even more casually to Sirius, "If you want, we can talk about Harry's present later?"

Sirius nodded. "Sure." It would still be a while before he thawed out completely, but they were already making great progress.

Visibly relieved, Regulus turned away and ran a hand over Barty's back before they headed back inside. Remus and Sirius were left alone.

"Feel like taking a few steps?" Sirius asked, looking at Remus with a slightly odd look.

"Okay."

They started moving, roaming through the neatly mown grass, between rose bushes and box trees, interlacing their hands.

"When can I expect your band's big performance at the aftershow later?", Remus ended their amicable silence after a while.

"Good question," Sirius laughed. "I really don't know if that was such a good idea. Leo was already in party mood earlier when we were on the phone. I hope Dave and Tilly manage to get him here in one piece."

"Wow, how come?"

"He's completed his bachelor's degree, however he did it," Sirius mused. "He's over the moon. On the bright side, I might not even have to obliviate him tonight."

"It would certainly be funny to show him a few magic tricks."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "He'd collapse. But I think Tilly would really love it."

Remus had met Sirius's friends a few times by now. And he had worked so hard to present himself as the ideal boyfriend, that he even got them to like him by now.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"I should hope so." Sirius playfully poked Remus in the side with his elbow. Then after a few more steps, he suddenly stopped and pulled Remus's hand to make him do the same. He turned so that they were facing each other, came very close and put his hands on Remus's shoulders.

"Number?"

He was always surprised how much Sirius saw through him.

"Three", he answered, smiling.

"Okay."

Three out of ten. It was not too bad. A random bloke named Declan who happened to remind him of his countless memory lapses was not enough to ruin his day anymore.

The scale was a rule they had established in the first months of living

together again. Sirius had brought it with him from his therapy. If there was something, small or big, that was weighing on their mind, they would rate the severity on a scale of one to ten. The other person could then adjust their reaction to it.

With a three, a few words of encouragement were enough.

"Declan doesn't matter, just as little as Susan, Amos or all the others. You don't have to remember them."

"I know," Remus muttered. He really did, but he couldn't help the quiet melancholy that still sneaked up on him sometimes because of it.

"Stop it," Sirius breathed, rubbed Remus's shoulders as if to warm him up. The gesture was so sweet that it made him smile tiredly.

"Declan is nobody to weep over, Moony, believe me", Sirius added with a meaningful look.

"Yes..." The gloomy mood lost some of its sharpness.

Sirius continued with his cheering up, putting all his wit into it. He continued until Remus eventually couldn't help but burst out laughing and all was well again.

Their life was not perfect, maybe even far from it. Even after all this time, there were still bad days. Days when he had nightmares of his victims, was cold and forbidding, when all the remorse and the missing memories became too much to bear. And there would always be days when Sirius was angry and sad because Remus was the way he was and because he would sometimes miss things he couldn't even name.

But they had found their strategy to live with it. Every time it got too much, when his head wasn't in it or he was threatening to despair, he would lean forward, as he was doing now, and kiss Sirius. Would close his eyes for a moment, feel Sirius's skin and hair under his fingers, would just be in the moment. And then he would break away from him, whisper "I love you" and mean it.

Sirius would then return the words, smile his beautiful little smile and it would settle like a balm on Remus. And it would make him remember again that he didn't have to know everything. That it was okay that he wasn't whole anymore. It was okay.

Because in Sirius's eyes, he was enough.

Because when Sirius was with him, none the hardships mattered anymore.

"Okay, enough sulking. You still owe me a dance."

Remus looked at him feignedly clueless.

"I do?"

"You promised, you moron."

"I did?"

Sirius rolled his eyes, took him by the hand again and started pulling him along with him.

"You're not getting out of this one, mate."

And as he let Sirius pull him along, playing stubborn as an umbrella in a headwind, he thought of all that he actually owed Sirius. What he could not even put into words, what he would never be able to outweigh. It was enough for him to willingly surrender to his wish.

Following an impulse, he gave in to Sirius's pull, taking the momentum forward with him and playfully wrapping his arm around Sirius's shoulders, as if they were still disgustingly motivated teenagers, inseparable truants, the best of friends.

"All right, you convinced me," Remus grinned. "And I already know what song I want to dance to."

He quickly pulled out his wand and waved it before the dull music inside suddenly stopped. Just for a moment. Then a very distinct guitar riff sounded, accompanied by muffled shouts of approval from James and Mary.

It made Sirius laugh.

"You're so predictable," he chuckled and leaned into Remus's exuberant embrace. "But I love it."

Now it was Remus who rushed forward, pulling Sirius along with him, who followed him enthusiastically.

And then they were already inside, singing along to Marc Bolan's inimitable voice. Surrounded by friends and layered with memories of their last night at Hogwarts, one of the happiest nights of their lives.

And Remus was home.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Songlyrics: 'Alles war schön und nichts tat weh / Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt' by Casper (the title being a quote from Kurt Vonnegurts 'Slaughterhouse-Five')

Wow... we've reached the end. :')
My first english fic! That was an adventure I can tell you... Never thought I'd actually do it.

Thanks to all the people that commented throughout the last weeks/months, that was really motivating! Without you I most likely wouldn't have finished this thing nearly as fast. You're the best! ❤

And thanks to everyone for reading it!!! Over 250 000 words, thank you so much! If you liked it, please let me know in form of kudos, bookmarks or comments! I'm happy about every single one! ❤

I plan to edit the whole thing again in a few weeks, so I'm also thankful for mistakes you found that I could even out (unfitting words, logical or grammatical errors etc...)
Also wanted to say that writing this fic was really my bright spot of 2022! I fucked up my knee very badly in January 2022 and couldn't walk for a few months. Reading fanfiction was my main distraction and that way I discovered the Marauders Fandom and fell in love with it! Eventually this fic came to be and quickly grew into the longest story I ever wrote! And it accompanied me through my recovery :)
So I really have a deep personal connection to it and I really hope some of the blood, sweat and tears (literally) that went into it came through and made something decent!

As of now I don’t have a new project in mind. But give me one boring afternoon and I might return with the next idea :) I’ll probably never leave the Marauders fandom anyway.

Until then,

Farewell, traveller.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!